



Old Believers

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Introduction

The Old Believers (старообрядцы) emerged in seventeenth-century Russia as opponents of the liturgical reforms introduced by Patriarch Nikon and supported by Tsar Alexei I. Convinced that the traditional rites of the Russian Orthodox Church preserved the only true form of Christianity, they regarded the reforms as a sign of apostasy and evidence that the world had entered the final stage of history. Their worldview was deeply shaped by apocalyptic expectations, centred on the imminent coming of the Antichrist, the corruption of earthly authority, and the conviction that only steadfast adherence to the ancestral faith could secure salvation in the last days.

Apocalyptic Moods in Rus' before the Emergence of the Old Believers

Long before the emergence of the Old Believers' movement, strong apocalyptic sentiments were already present in Rus' (the medieval East Slavic polity centred on Kyiv and later its successor principalities, from which Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus trace part of their historical heritage). Drawing on Byzantine tradition, it was widely believed that the history of the world would span seven thousand years (Смолѣнский 1860, 190–93). According to these calculations, the end was expected no later than the turn of 1491–1492. However, when—much to the surprise of many Orthodox believers—the anticipated conclusion did not occur, a theological explanation became necessary. This led to the conviction that, through the steadfast faith of the Rus' people, God had shown mercy and prolonged the world's existence. At the same time, it was stressed that the continued survival of reality depended on the preservation of the purity of faith among the Rus'.

Initial distrust toward the Greek Orthodox clergy and ecclesiastical authorities gradually evolved into deep religious suspicion. When the threat from the Ottoman Turks became imminent, Emperor John VIII Palaiologos (reigned 1425–1448) sought military assistance from the West by supporting the conclusion of the Union of Florence, an agreement intended to reconcile the Orthodox and Catholic churches. In Rus', however, the Union was widely perceived as a betrayal of the true faith. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 was interpreted as divine punishment for this compromise, a view that strongly reinforced the sense of the distinctiveness and exceptional role of the Moscow branch of Orthodoxy. Consequently, Rus' began to

regard itself as a holy land, chosen to fulfil a special mission in the history of the world. In 1524, the monk Philotheus of Pskov (1465–1542), in a letter to Grand Prince Vasily III (1479–1533), proclaimed Moscow the “Third Rome.” The origins of this idea, however, can be traced back to 1492, when it was articulated by Metropolitan Zosimus (died 1494). According to this concept, the first two Romes had fallen under the weight of heresy, Moscow became the third, and there would be no fourth. This worldview was deeply rooted in eschatological expectations. It was believed that if the Русская земля (Rus’ land) were to fall into sin, no Orthodox power would remain capable of assuming spiritual leadership, and pure Christianity would vanish from the face of the earth (Смирнов 1900, 837–38).

This process was accompanied by a consistent policy of distancing Rus’ from all that was foreign. Since true Christianity was identified exclusively with Orthodoxy, differences between followers of other religions and members of other churches became largely irrelevant—all “infidels” were simply regarded as pagans. Even clergy from Greece, who were permitted to participate in the liturgy, were advised to exercise restraint in their interactions with Russian brethren. In 1551, the Council of a Hundred Chapters (also known as the Stoglav Synod, Стоглавый Собор) was convened, which proclaimed the superiority of Russian Orthodoxy over the Greek, standardised rituals according to native models, and declared other external traditions heretical (Панов 2014, 70–77). As a result, the entire state began to be conceived as a sacred space in which even the most mundane daily activities assumed religious significance. At the centre of this structure stood the tsar, perceived as an instrument in God’s hands. Yet his power was not considered absolute. It was believed that obedience did not extend to a ruler who persecuted others and violated God’s law. A striking example of this principle was Metropolitan Philip II (in office 1566–1568), who publicly rebuked Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible (1530–1584) during a liturgy for his acts of cruelty. For his steadfastness, Philip was strangled on the tsar’s orders. The next stage in strengthening the belief in the special mission of Rus’ came with the elevation of the Moscow metropolitan to the rank of patriarch in 1589. Although the Moscow patriarchate ranked only fifth in the diptychs (liturgical lists of Orthodox Churches arranged according to their order of precedence), for the Rus’ people this constituted a symbolic confirmation of their unique mission within the Christian world.

Shortly thereafter, Orthodoxy suffered a severe shock with the Union of Brest, when a portion of Orthodox hierarchs entered communion with the Western Church. In Russia, this act was interpreted as a capitulation to the devil, further intensifying apocalyptic sentiments. The Archimandrite of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra (the historic Orthodox Monastery of the Caves in Kyiv), Zacharias Kopystensky (died 1627), developed the concept of three apostasies. He assigned particular significance to two numbers from Revelation—1000 and 666—whose sum corresponded to the year 1666. According to his interpretation, the period of relative freedom from the influence of the evil spirit ended around the year 1000, followed shortly by the first schism in 1054, when the Roman Church separated from Orthodoxy. The second apostasy was expected at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, associated with the Union of Brest in 1596. The third schism was anticipated for 1666 (Ареева 2001, 575). Fragments of his work were later published in Moscow, with a significant modification: the site of the Antichrist’s appearance was relocated from Rome to Moscow. The argument was that since Moscow was the Third Rome and the guardian of the purity of faith, it was precisely there that its ultimate adversary could appear. These eschatological speculations, combined with the dramatic experiences of the era (the occupation of the Kremlin by Polish Catholic troops, struggles for power, famine, epidemics, and other natural disasters), created the historical and mental backdrop necessary for understanding the emergence of the Old Believers’ movement.

The Reforms of Nikon

In 1645, the young and deeply devout Tsar Alexei I Romanov ascended the Russian throne (reigning until 1676). From an early age, he displayed remarkable religious zeal: he never missed church services, often rose at night to pray until dawn, and possessed an impressive command of ecclesiastical canons. Thanks to his extensive reading of both religious and secular works, he ranked among the best-educated men of his era. At the same time, despite long-standing attempts to isolate Russian society from external influences, the tsar—regarded as God’s viceroy on earth—remained visibly receptive to Western culture. His residence contained a theatre stage, musical instruments, and secular paintings, all elements to which Russian Orthodoxy was traditionally opposed. Alexei played cards and chess, hunted, and ensured that his children learned Latin and Polish (Fuhrmann 1981). Considering himself the heir to Byzantium, the tsar sought to strengthen the authority of the state in order to enable Russia to assume leadership over all Orthodox Christians. Achieving this vision required the unification of rituals, liturgical books, iconography, and even Orthodox architecture. In 1652, Alexei appointed his trusted associate Nikon as patriarch (in office 1652–1666). In accordance with the tsar’s will, Nikon immediately began to “correct” the Rus’ rites, adapting them to Greek practice. To this end, Greek Orthodox scholars and Ukrainian monks were invited to Moscow to compare Russian liturgical books with their Greek counterparts (Федоров 2000, 632).

At first glance, these efforts seemed justified. Although the process of standardising rituals had begun as early as the second half of the fifteenth century, it had never been brought to a satisfactory conclusion. Because Moscow theologians possessed only limited knowledge of Greek and Latin, their translations of the writings of the Church Fathers often relied on unauthorised Slavic copies originating from diverse—and sometimes dubious—sources. It was widely believed that centuries of manual copying had introduced numerous distortions into Rus’ liturgical texts. Yet this approach contained serious weaknesses.

First, it effectively implied that earlier generations of Orthodox Rus’ believers—the very creators of the idea of the “Third Rome”—had failed to preserve the purity of the faith. The argument that they lacked education did not convince opponents of the reforms, who cited the words of the Apostle Paul that true Christians are “fools for Christ” (1 Corinthians 4:10). Instead of learned authorities, they elevated the *holy fools* (юродивые) and anti-Union polemicists, who praised the “simple, unlearned, and humble,” yet steadfastly faithful Rus’ people (Billington 2008, 130–31).

Second, as mentioned earlier, many Russians regarded themselves as the sole guardians of the uncorrupted faith. While the tsar may have sought the unification of all Orthodox Christians, supporters of the old rites interpreted such efforts as a dangerous compromise with heretics. In their view, the experience of the Union of Brest had already demonstrated that concessions of this kind inevitably led to the acceptance of heresy.

Third, Nikon displayed an uncritical admiration for everything Greek. When Macarius III, Patriarch of Antioch (in office 1647–1672), arrived in Russia in 1654, the Moscow patriarch kept him there for more than a year in order to study Greek ceremonies as thoroughly as possible. His behaviour provoked outrage among clergy and believers alike, especially when he replaced the Russian mitre with a Greek one. Nikon openly declared that although he was Russian, his religion and faith were Greek (Scheffel 1991, 31–32). Even if the opponents of reform idealised native traditions, Nikon appeared to fall into the opposite extreme.

Finally, neither Greeks nor Russians possessed at the time a sophisticated understanding of the historical development of the liturgy. Reformers relied primarily on the 1602 Venetian edition of the *Euchologion*, which made many of their corrections—put mildly—highly questionable (Meyendorff 1991, 28–33).

The reforms addressed a wide range of specific issues. Old Believers recognised baptism exclusively by triple immersion, whereas the new rite also permitted baptism by pouring water. In the old ritual, the *Alleluia* was pronounced twice before the words “Glory to Thee, O God” (Аллилуия, аллилуия, слава Тебе, Боже); Nikon’s reform prescribed its repetition three times. Other elements of liturgical practice were also altered: the direction of processions, the spelling of the name Jesus (in old books: Исусъ, *Isus*; in new ones: Исусъ, *Iisus*), the use of seven instead of five prosphora (small loaves of leavened bread) during the Eucharist, and the number of bows accompanying the Prayer of St Ephrem the Syrian (Paert 2011, 419). Corrections were also introduced into the text of the Nicene Creed: the word “true” referring to the Holy Spirit was removed, and the phrase “the Kingdom has no end” was replaced by “the Kingdom shall have no end.” Although—as noted earlier—these reforms were primarily concerned with ritual rather than dogma, for the Old Believers they possessed fundamental significance. This is particularly evident in the case of two changes relating to the sign of the cross.

The first concerned the status of crosses composed of two beams versus those with three. For Old Believers, the three beams symbolised the Holy Trinity, whereas the two-bar cross was seen as contradicting the foundations of Christian faith. It could be used only on liturgical vestments, where it referred to the apostolic succession transmitted by the apostles. Old Believers invoked the story of Peter, who—according to tradition—was crucified on a cross different from that of Christ. In their view, placing such a cross at the centre of a church (on prosphora, icons, the altar, or the domes of churches) meant venerating a human being. Such a cult, they argued, was practised by Catholics, who elevated the pope—the successor of Peter—to a place belonging to God. Significantly, in explaining the symbolism of the cross, Old Believers drew on apocryphal texts, even while accusing their theological opponents of relying on non-canonical sources. The three-bar cross, which they believed to have been made from the Tree of Life growing in Paradise, was also associated with the Rus’ tradition emphasising Christ’s royal dignity more than his suffering. If the crucifixion was understood as the enthronement of a ruler, Jesus ought to have a footrest—the lower beam of the cross. Considerable importance was also attached to the *titulus*. According to Old Believers, the proper inscription should read: “Jesus Christ, King of Glory.” Patriarch Nikon, however, replaced it with “King of the Jews,” which, in their view, undermined Christ’s universal and glorious kingship by reducing it to a specific historical moment (Przybył 1999b, 206–12). As a result, they believed that the cross had been stripped of its power and reduced to an instrument of human cult—and thus an instrument of the Antichrist.

The second issue concerned the manner of making the sign of the cross. Old Believers insisted that it should be performed exclusively with two extended fingers. Patriarch Nikon, by contrast, endorsed the gesture using three fingers. Advocates of the older custom claimed that the new practice had been adopted from Armenians or Greeks, which in their eyes signified submission to foreign and heretical influences. In reality, the situation was far more complex. In Rus’, the two ways of making the sign of the cross had long coexisted, leading to numerous disputes and controversies. Ultimately, the Stoglav Council recognised the two-finger sign as the only orthodox method. For Old Believers, the decisions of this council were binding and concerned the very purity of the faith. The two extended fingers—the index and middle fingers—symbolised the two natures of Christ, while the remaining three, joined together, represented the

Holy Trinity. In the new method, not all fingers were engaged in the same way, which, in the eyes of Old Believers, rendered the sign incomplete and therefore invalid. They went even further: the new manner of crossing oneself was regarded as the very seal of the Antichrist. To justify this claim, they invoked the story of Pope Stephen VI (pontificate 896–897), who allegedly ordered the body of his predecessor Formosus (pontificate 891–896) to be exhumed and had the three fingers with which he had blessed the faithful cut off. In the imagination of Old Believers, the three extended and joined fingers came to symbolise not the Holy Trinity but its blasphemous parody—the apocalyptic dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (Przybył 1999a, 120–23).

As noted earlier, Nikon was able to introduce his reforms thanks to the explicit support of the tsar. Both men were ambitious, and neither intended to confine his authority—whether secular or spiritual—to a country widely perceived at the time as peripheral and backward. Alexei I Romanov aspired to become one of Europe's most eminent monarchs, the heir of the Roman Empire—an emperor. Aware of the history of his predecessors, he understood perfectly well that the Russian word *tsar* (царь) corresponded more closely to the Greek *basileus* (βασιλεύς) than to the Latin *Imperator Romanus* and thus did not fully convey the universal aspirations of imperial authority. Nikon, for his part, sought to become the supreme religious authority in the Orthodox world—a kind of 'pope of the East.' They did not intend to abandon their native tradition, but they believed it had to be adapted to standards prevailing in the broader Christian world. Only in this way could their ambitions be realised. Such a policy, however, inevitably generated conflicts—both with defenders of the old order and ultimately between the two leaders themselves.

From the beginning, Nikon enjoyed the support of almost the entire episcopate; the only exception was Bishop Paul of Kolomna, who was deposed in 1654. It is difficult to explain unequivocally why the other hierarchs accepted the reforms without objection, but the decisive factors were likely the authority of the tsar and the patriarch's uncompromising, authoritarian style of governance. Resistance arose primarily among sections of the lower clergy, especially those previously associated with the circle known as the Zealots of Ancient Piety (Ревнители старого благочестия), gathered around the archpriest Avvakum (1620/1621–1682). As part of the repression, he was exiled to the distant eastern regions of Russia. After returning to Moscow, he nevertheless hoped for a change in circumstances, particularly since he was received favourably by the ruler (Петров 1990, 35). These hopes seemed even more plausible when Nikon fell out of the tsar's favour after attempting to strengthen the Church's position vis-à-vis secular authority. Soon, however, events dispelled the illusions of the Old Believers. In 1666–1667, a synod convened in Moscow, which, although it deposed Nikon as patriarch, simultaneously excommunicated all supporters of the old rites unless they renounced their practices.

In the eyes of the Old Believers, God himself was providing unmistakable signs that the reforms were disastrous. From the moment they were introduced, misfortunes—so they claimed—began to multiply in the Muscovite state (Петров 1990, 12). The earth had supposedly become the domain of evil forces, while the air was filled with demons. Epidemics, natural disasters, and all extraordinary phenomena were interpreted as manifestations of divine punishment. In their view, the state was descending into decline, and the space of holiness was steadily shrinking. Once, the entire land of Rus' had been sacred; now, they believed, only a few Old Believer communities preserved the true faith. After the synod, opponents of the reforms were forced to live in hiding, persecuted by both ecclesiastical and secular authorities. Although the Old Believer movement was primarily religious in nature, it also attracted those who opposed broader cultural, political, and economic transformations. The beginning of the reforms coincided with significant

social and economic changes that strengthened serfdom. Increasing repression against Old Believers only intensified their apocalyptic mood and their conviction that the coming of the Antichrist was imminent.

The Antichrist

The appearance of the Antichrist in Old Believer doctrine constitutes a subject that is highly complex; this milieu never developed a single, coherent concept on the matter. As early as 27 February 1654, Ivan Neronov (1591–1670), one of the leading representatives of the party of Zealots, addressed a letter to Tsar Alexei I in which he expressed his conviction that the reign of the Antichrist was approaching and linked it directly to the reforms introduced by Patriarch Nikon. As mentioned earlier, since the time of Kopystenski, particular significance had been attached in Russia to the year 1666. Archimandrite Spiridon Potemkin, counted among the first leaders of the Old Believer movement, maintained that the Antichrist's final victory over the world would occur precisely in that year. The decisions of the Moscow synod, which placed the supporters of the old rites under anathema, were interpreted within this framework. The mass persecutions that followed the synod further reinforced this interpretation in the consciousness of Old Believers. Some even went so far as to claim that from 1666 onward, the Antichrist ruled in Moscow. The problem, however, remained the question of his identity. Among the earliest Old Believer treatises on the Antichrist were two works written in 1669 by the deacon Fyodor, reflecting the views of the principal leaders of the movement, including Avvakum (Areeba 2001, 575–76). As the fundamental proof of apostasy that, in his view, had befallen Rus', he pointed to the alteration of the text of the Creed—specifically the removal of the word “true” in reference to the Holy Spirit. Earlier apostasies, dated to the years 1054 and 1596, were likewise associated with changes in the confession of faith. Consequently, these events were interpreted as the collapse of the idea of the Third Rome and as the official Church's formal recognition of the authority of the Antichrist.

Some believers identified the Antichrist with Patriarch Nikon, yet the principal ideologues of the movement rejected this identification. Calling Nikon the Antichrist often had a polemical character and stemmed from the ambiguity of the term itself, which could denote both the eschatological adversary of Christ and any apostate from the faith, or simply function as an insult. Leading defenders of the old tradition further emphasised that Nikon could not be the ultimate Antichrist because of his origin. According to Orthodox tradition, the Antichrist was to descend from the Jewish tribe of Dan and to exercise monarchical power (Hippolytus in Roberts and Donaldson 1919, 207). Other Old Believers, influenced by ideas associated with the Radical Reformation, identified the Antichrist with the Roman pope, pointing to the union of spiritual and secular authority in his person. This interpretation, however, also generated difficulties. Since, in their view, Rome had long persisted in heresy, the question arose as to why one should still expect the future manifestation of the “true” Antichrist there. The possibility of identifying him with the Russian tsar was also considered, yet Old Believers generally avoided such unequivocal judgements. They sought to maintain loyalty to the monarch while hoping that he might return to the old rites.

Additional difficulties concerned the determination of the time and place of the Antichrist's appearance. It was widely held that his coming must be preceded by the signs foretold in the Apocalypse, including not only catastrophes but also the appearance of witnesses warning humanity against submitting to the enemy. Tradition identified them with the prophets Elijah and Enoch, yet among Old Believers, the view spread that a third witness would appear—John, the author of the Apocalypse. Their mission was to last

three and a half years; afterwards, they would be killed and, after three and a half days, rise again. Three potential places for the manifestation of the Antichrist were usually mentioned: Jerusalem, Rome, and Moscow. The Fathers of the Church most frequently pointed to Jerusalem and to the Temple, emphasising that it was there that the Antichrist would assume power. For Old Believers, however, Moscow appeared an especially probable location for the revelation of the ultimate enemy, since they regarded it as the bastion of the pure Christian faith. This suspicion was further reinforced by the fact that Patriarch Nikon had built near Moscow a monastery called New Jerusalem, while nearby places and rivers were given names drawn from the topography of Palestine—such as Jordan, Golgotha, or Nazareth (Andrusiewicz 1999, 187–88).

The uncertainty surrounding the identity, place, and time of the Antichrist's appearance inclined Old Believers toward considerable caution in formulating definitive theses. Some even attempted to postpone the moment of his arrival, hoping that a return by the tsar to the old rites might reverse the course of events. The archpriest Avvakum maintained that the Antichrist had not yet appeared but had merely sent his servants into the world. A gathering of Old Believers in Novgorod in 1694 declared that, so far, the Antichrist ruled only in a spiritual sense, depriving the faithful of valid sacraments. Postponing his coming created space for a variety of theological interpretations. One of them identified the two horns of the Beast described in chapter 13 of the Apocalypse (Revelation 13:11) with the tsar and the patriarch, or with two successive rulers, the second of whom had yet to appear. The leaders of the movement urged believers to concentrate on moral life rather than indulge in eschatological speculation. They emphasised that "of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, but the Father alone" (Matthew 24:36). What mattered above all was perseverance in the faith and resistance to the supporters of reform. It was believed that before the end of time the faithful would undergo numerous trials, including the possibility of death. Biblical precedents—the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah—were frequently invoked to stress that only a few would be saved. Even without the physical presence of the Antichrist, a human being could become his instrument.

It is worth noting that despite this general caution in formulating final judgements, some individuals nevertheless attempted to determine precise dates for eschatological events. One such figure was the monk Abraham, who claimed that the Antichrist would appear in 1688 and rule for 1260 days, after which the Second Coming of Christ would take place. He also employed the number 1666, borrowed from Kopystenski. Yet, unlike other authors, he shifted the beginning of the calculation to the year 33, arguing that Satan had been bound only after Christ's descent into Hades. He further subtracted eight years, resulting from the difference between the chronology used by Old Believers and the Byzantine era (Przybył 1999a, 96).

Although Old Believers never developed a unified doctrine concerning the nature of the Antichrist and repeatedly postponed the moment of his arrival, the idea never disappeared from their religious consciousness. In later periods, more radical communities forbade their members from performing military service, possessing official documents, or even using money, which was interpreted as bearing the 'seal of the Antichrist'. In 1820, during a police search among Old Believer merchants in Moscow, authorities discovered a portrait of Tsar Alexander I Romanov depicted with horns, a tail, and the number 666 on his forehead. Russia's defeats during the First World War revived apocalyptic moods among some Old Believers, leading them once again to believe that the coming of the Antichrist was near (Poliakov 1991, 155).

As noted, after the Moscow synod, the Old Believers were subjected to various forms of persecution by both secular and ecclesiastical authorities since they were perceived not only as religious opponents but also as potential political subversives. This perception was somewhat paradoxical, given that—apart from a few isolated cases—they did not engage in armed resistance against the state. Instead, they most often responded to persecution by fleeing to sparsely populated regions, forests, and frontier areas. The principal leaders of the movement, including the archpriest Avvakum and the deacon Fyodor, were imprisoned in the fortress at Pustozersk, where on 14 April 1682 they were burned alive. Settlements inhabited by opponents of the reforms were destroyed, and their property was confiscated and sold. The intensification of repression led to the first waves of Old Believer emigration abroad—to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Sweden, and Courland (Iwaniec 1977, 32–34).

Because the Old Believers lacked a unified leadership structure—such as a synod of bishops—differences in religious views and practices gradually emerged among individual communities. Some groups adopted more radical positions than others. A particularly serious problem arose when the priests who had been ordained before Nikon's reform, and who provided pastoral care to Old Believer communities, began to die. In response, some communities attempted to persuade priests ordained after the reform to renounce what they considered erroneous practices and to administer the sacraments to Old Believers according to the old rites. Others, however, maintained that the official Church had entirely fallen into the "clutches of the Antichrist," and therefore rejected any cooperation with clergy ordained under the new rites, even if those clergy expressed repentance. In this way, the movement divided into two major currents: the *popovtsy* (поповщина), who sought to preserve the priesthood, and the *bezpopovtsy* (беспоповцы), who accepted the necessity of functioning without priests and without the full sacramental life of the Church.

During the eighteenth century, the situation of the Old Believers in Russia gradually improved, though this process unfolded unevenly. As late as 1745, Empress Elizabeth reaffirmed the decisions of the Moscow synod. A more significant change occurred during the reign of her successor, Peter III, who declared that Old Believers should be treated on an equal footing with members of the Russian Orthodox Church. The most important reforms, however, were introduced by Catherine II. In 1762 she legalised Old Believer worship, and two years later she allowed Old Believers to enter the merchant estate legally. As a result, influential Old Believer merchant families emerged, and numerous urban communities developed. Toward the end of the century, Paul I pursued a more differentiated policy: he tolerated the *popovtsy* but regarded the leaders of the *bezpopovtsy* as dangerous to the state and ordered their arrest. The policy of greater tolerance also led some Old Believers to return to the Russian Orthodox Church while retaining their traditional rites (Iwaniec 1977, 45–48).

Nevertheless, repression and discrimination against Old Believers resumed, particularly during the reign of Nicholas I. In this period, they were officially classified as a dangerous sect and placed under constant police surveillance. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century were the restrictions imposed upon them gradually relaxed. From 1883, they were allowed to build churches freely and to practise all professions, including employment within the state administration. They were still forbidden, however, to recruit new adherents, organise public processions, ring church bells, or publish religious periodicals (Poliakov 1991, 141). At the same time, the Russian Orthodox Church continued to regard the Old Believers as a spiritual threat and pressured Russian rulers to maintain policies of repression against them.

All restrictions were finally abolished only with the decree on religious toleration issued in 1905. The number of Old Believers in Russia before the fall of the tsarist regime remains a matter of debate. Different scholars, relying on official registers of Old Believers and the results of censuses conducted in the Russian Empire, estimate their population at between approximately 10 and 25 million people (Grek-Pabisowa 1999, 15–17).

Most Old Believers reacted negatively to the October Revolution of 1917. Their situation deteriorated dramatically during collectivisation. Many of them, as relatively prosperous peasants, were classified as kulaks and subjected to repression; resistance to the creation of collective farms often resulted in arrests, sentences to labour camps, and even executions. These developments led to the dispersal of traditional Old Believer communities and contributed to the progressive secularisation of society. At the same time, scholarly research on Old Believer culture and history was conducted within the Soviet Union. In the 1930s, the massive anti-religious persecutions carried out in the USSR forced Old Believers to conduct their religious life underground, and many of their leaders were executed. During the Second World War, apocalyptic moods once again spread among Old Believer communities, and some of them established hidden settlements in forest regions. After the war, the number of Old Believers in the USSR increased with the incorporation of the Baltic states, yet by 1960 their population was estimated at only about one million believers. In 1971, the Russian Orthodox Church lifted the anathema imposed on the Old Believers and initiated contacts with them. At the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, their number was estimated at approximately three million people (Poliakov 1991, 176–77).

Today, it is difficult to determine the precise number of Old Believers because of their organisational fragmentation and worldwide dispersion. The Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church (Русская Православная Старообрядческая Церковь) is the second-largest Orthodox community in Russia after the Russian Orthodox Church. In 2018, its metropolitanate estimated that about two million Old Believers of various currents lived worldwide. In the case of the *bezpopovtsy*, estimates suggest that between 1.5 and 2 million believers reside in Russia alone, although these figures may be inflated. In many regions of the country, Old Believer communities have disappeared entirely or are no longer represented (Таранец 2018).

Suicides

From the very beginning, the Old Believers were prepared to die for their faith. In 1667, the monks of the Solovetsky Monastery submitted to the tsar a letter on which they had been working since 1658, declaring that they would rather lose their lives than accept the reforms, submit to the power of evil, and forfeit their salvation. As would soon become clear in the case of the Solovetsky monks, declarations of readiness to lose one's life were not merely empty words.

News of the reforms reached the monastery as early as 1657, yet the superior of the community, Iliia, did not even consider them—he simply locked the books containing the new rite in a cabinet. For a time the matter subsided, but in 1666 an envoy of the official Church, Archimandrite Sergius, arrived at the monastery in order to enforce the implementation of the reforms more effectively. In response, the monks proclaimed the three-fingered sign of the cross to be the seal of the Antichrist. A siege of the monastery began and lasted for eight years. The Solovetsky monks were so determined to defend the old rites that in 1673 they refused to pray for the tsar and even began to insult him. The monastery finally fell in 1676, and

most of the monks were killed. Some, however, managed to escape and contributed to the radicalisation of the opposition, which later led to mass self-immolations. The defence of the monastery and the heroic stance of the monks became a symbol of defending the faith of the ancestors to the very end.

After the Moscow Synod, most Old Believers began fleeing to remote and difficult-to-access regions. For some time, this strategy produced the desired results. Eventually, however, the authorities initiated systematic persecutions, and places where one could live peacefully and safely gradually disappeared. Many believers feared capture and the possibility that, under torture, they might be forced to renounce their faith. For this reason, various options were considered, including taking one's own life. Among the Old Believers, admiration was expressed for the followers of Kapiton—a hermit who preached that the world was ruled by the Antichrist—who actively sought martyrdom and often found it. Some of his adherents even resorted to self-immolation in 1665 and 1666 (Crummey 1970, 45).

In 1687, Ignatii, a former monk of the Solovetsky Monastery, led a group of Old Believers who seized the Paleostrovsky Monastery. The choice of this place was not accidental, since according to the Old Believers, it was there that the first martyr for the old faith, Bishop Paul of Kolomna, had died. When troops attempted to retake the monastery, the 2,700 people within its walls decided to commit self-immolation. A similar course of action was taken by another former Solovetsky monk, Pimin, who gathered several thousand followers around his hermitage near the shore of the White Sea. When the authorities attempted to capture them, they too chose to perish in the flames. Another episode also involved a former Solovetsky monk, German, and once again concerned the seizure of the Paleostrovsky Monastery. In this case, approximately 1,500 people died in the fire. Many similar examples could be cited. In numerous cases, the pattern of events was similar: a group of believers gathered around a charismatic and uncompromising hermit, and when the authorities caught them by surprise and escape was no longer possible, they decided to take their own lives. It is worth noting that Avvakum approved of such a "baptism by fire" as an effective weapon against the Antichrist. There were also individual cases of taking one's own life—for example, Epifanii threw himself from a cliff into a river and drowned (Crummey 1970, 45–51).

The most commonly chosen method of taking one's own life was self-immolation, although other forms also occurred, such as starvation, burial alive, or drowning. Neither water nor fire was chosen arbitrarily—they carried sacred, purifying, and renewing functions. The Old Believers most often relied on fire, which in Old Russian symbolism was both sacred and destructive. Everything consumed by flames was believed to be purified and to ascend with the smoke toward heaven. Fire also served a protective function, forming a barrier against impure forces and demons. In the pre-Christian traditions of Rus', the symbolism of sacred fire was already present: it was thought to possess the power to connect the earthly realm with the divine, and its flames served as a conduit for spiritual transformation (Przybył 1999a, 132).

Soon, however, voices of dissent emerged against voluntary self-destruction. As early as 1681–1682, in the Trans-Ural region, the elders Abraham the Hungarian and Ivan Kodskii opposed acts of self-immolation. In 1691, the elder Evfrosin composed a treatise arguing against the practice. He emphasised that taking one's own life was a sin according to Christian standards and that ancient martyrs faced death only when escape was impossible. He also warned that mass acts of self-destruction endangered the survival of Old Believer customs. Furthermore, he noted that among those taking their own lives were sinful individuals, unprepared to meet God, and thus unworthy of emulation. Children participating in these events posed an additional concern, as they were often unaware of the consequences of their actions. Other critics highlighted practices accompanying self-immolations: some used hallucinogenic substances to facilitate

death, while others overestimated their endurance, responding with screams, panic, and curses. Such occurrences reinforced arguments against the practice and perpetuated the image of Old Believers as fanatical and dangerous.

In any case, opposition among certain Old Believer leaders, combined with policy changes after 1689, meant that fewer adherents of the old rites resorted to radical measures. Peter I the Great (reigning 1682–1725) distinguished between religious dissenters and political insurgents, ensuring that the former were not subjected to the harshest repression. This relative tolerance pushed apocalyptic currents to the margins, though they never disappeared entirely. The readiness—or willingness—to confront a corrupt world occasionally triggered outbreaks of radicalism, including mass acts of self-destruction, most commonly by fire. For instance, in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the Kovalyov settlement near the village of Ternovka within the Russian Empire, an Old Believer hermitage existed that isolated its residents from the outside world. Influenced by a figure named Vitaliia, the hermits regarded the 1896 census as an instrument of the Antichrist, which led to tragic events, including burying themselves and their children alive (Perrie 2022, 479). Similarly, in the 1970s, dramatic cases occurred among Old Believer communities in Canada: unwilling to comply with government-mandated public schooling, some parents killed their own children, claiming that this act would save their souls. To this day, Old Believers maintain divergent views on such practices.

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