

THE UNBROKEN CROSS

To What Extent Did the Old Believers Successfully Preserve Russian Traditionalist Orthodox Belief between 1666 and 1917?

The Nikonian reforms, which aimed to align Russian practices with Greek Orthodox tradition, led to one of the largest schisms in the Russian Orthodox Church. The Raskol split the Russian Orthodox Church into State Orthodox, which was based upon the Nikonian reforms and traditionalist groups that aimed to preserve the pre-Nikonian faith. This essay seeks to argue that between 1666 and 1917, the Old Believers did successfully preserve Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief to a large extent, by preserving their rituals through their socio-economic adaptations and cultural-religious resistance. This is clear through the Russian state itself confirming this, initially through the introduction of *edinoverie* in 1800 by Paul I (Palkin, 2016), which aimed to reconcile Old Believers with the Russian Orthodox Church by allowing them to maintain their own rites. Finally, through the 1906 decree on Old Believer communities (Gilbert, 2019), which granted full religious freedom to communities which had previously been persecuted. This essay will explore three distinct areas: the macro history of doctrinal division within the Christian World, the specific political context of Russia under Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, and the preservation strategies used by the Old Believers to preserve their rites and traditions.

Before analysing how Old Believers preserved their traditions it is important to look at what traditionalist Orthodox belief meant in the context of 17th century Russia. It refers to the pre-Nikonian liturgical practice, ritual forms, and textual tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church as they existed before the Nikonian reforms of 1652-1666. As Meyendorff argues, the old rites were more than simply practices, they were the ways through which Russian saints had achieved salvation (Meyendorff, 1991, p.55), therefore altering the rites meant corrupting the faith and the path to salvation, which had been used by Russian saints. Crucially, Meyendorff further argues that the Nikonian reforms were based on contemporary Greek texts of dubious authority (Meyendorff, 1991, p.42), meaning that what the Old Believers preserved was arguably more authentically ancient than what the state church imposed. The specific content of this traditionalist Orthodox belief included the two-fingered sign of the cross, the double Alleluia, processions moving with the sun, the old Slavonic service books, medieval Russian icon styles, and the Russian form of Jesus “Isus” as opposed to the Greek form “Iisus.”

The schism that occurred is best understood as being both religiously and politically caused. On one hand, the imperial ambitions of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich were one of the main political causes for why the rites were altered which then led to the schism. As Kapterev argued, Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich considered himself to be the successor to the ancient pious Greek emperors not only in matters of faith but as lawful heir to their realm (Kapterev, 1909, ch.2), as he believed that he or his successors were destined to rule Constantinople itself and liberate all Orthodox peoples that were at that time under Ottoman rule. Therefore, the church union between the Russian and Greek Orthodox was viewed as a first and necessary step toward future political union. This is further backed by the fact that Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich had sent a letter to Mount Athos on the 11th of January 1666, asking for three monks, namely Evfimii the confessor and his companions, as well as the Sudebnik (The legal code) and the Chinovnik of the whole imperial rank of the former pious Greek emperors (Gibbenet, 1884, p.882-883). The fact that Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich explicitly requested for the legal code of the Greek emperors, potentially shows that he wanted to emulate Byzantine Imperial Law in Russia, and thus drew Russia closer towards the Byzantine Empire. Therefore, for Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich to have been able to present Russia as a legitimate heir to the Byzantine Empire, he also had to align Russia's liturgy with Greek Orthodox practice. This led to the old rites being altered, in this way causing the schism in the Russian Orthodox Church to occur.

Moreover, religion was nonetheless also central to the schism. Paul Meyendorff argues that the basis of the 1655 Russian Sluzhebnik was not primitive Russian and Greek practice but the Venetian edition of 1602 of the Greek Euchologion, a service book along with 17th century "Lithuanian" books printed in Kiev and Striatin (Meyendorff, 1991, p.32). This revealed that Greek practices had displaced Russian practices as the standard for Orthodoxy. However, as Old Believers argued that the Greeks were the ones that had been corrupted by aligning with Rome during the Council of Florence in 1439 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026a) and by Ottoman rule, they refused to accept that the new Russian service book was based on "corrupted" contemporary Greek texts rather than on ancient Russian texts. The Council of Moscow in 1666-67 condemned the old rites (Perrie, 2023, p.77) and marked the new rites that were based on contemporary Greek texts as being the only orthodoxy. Defenders of the old rites had to resist the reform such as through the Solovetsky Petition in 1668, where monks refused the new rites (Clepper, 1990, p.30) or through Avvakum Petrov's continued resistance for which he was burned in 1682 (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2026b), thus causing the schism in the Russian Orthodox Church between Old Believers and the state Orthodoxy.

The Old Believers preserved their Russian Traditionalist Orthodox Belief to a large extent through two main strategies: through their cultural-religious resistance and their socio-economic adaptations. Firstly, the cultural-religious resistance of Old Believers consisted of three main strands: their liturgical and ritual preservation, their textual and literary preservation and textual creation, and their apocalyptic worldview. The liturgical, ritual preservation of Old Believers made their cultural-religious resistance largely successful. Old Believers preserved pre-Nikonian icons through the development of their own icon-painting schools most notably the Nevyansk school. Old Believer icons such as that of Holy Wisdom of God (see Figure 1),



Figure 1: *Sofia Premudrost' Bozhiia* [Holy Wisdom of God], last quarter of 18th c., Nevyansk (circle of the Bogatyrevs), tempera and gold on wood, 33.2 × 27 cm. Private collection, Yekaterinburg.

clearly preserved pre-Nikonian icon styles, through the presentation of the two-fingered hand gesture of blessing by Christ in the centre of the icon as well as through the darker face tones used in the icon as a rejection of the realistic flesh tones used in Western icons that heavily influenced the Russian Orthodox Church after the schism. The fact that the Nevyansk Icon museum holds over 700 Nevyansk icons spanning the 18th to early 20th centuries (Museum “Nevyanskaia ikona”), shows that pre-Nikonian styles were successfully preserved even after the state church icons became heavily influenced by western icons.

Moreover, after the 1723 Decree by the Holy Synod banned the casting and selling of cast folding icons and crosses (PSPR, 1875, p.31), it created a monopoly for Old Believers on the production of the cast icons and crosses as they were already outside the church and thus were able to successfully preserve their Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief by continuing to cast

the icons and crosses. Furthermore, the fact that the Holy Synod itself had renounced the cast icons and crosses meant that possession of them became a symbol of old belief and resistance against the authority of the Holy Synod. Additionally, the fact that the cast icons and crosses were cheap, durable, and mass-reproducible from a single matrix, which, as Buslaev noted, meant that they were in “wide use among the common people” (Buslaev, quoted in Gnutova and Zotova, 2000, p.6). This then led to the widespread use of Old Believer cast icons that contained the pre-Nikonian eight-pointed cross and the two-fingered blessing, allowing for the Old Believer Russian Traditionalist Orthodox belief to be efficiently spread throughout the Old Believer communities, which had been pushed to the peripheries of the Russian Empire by state persecution, in the Vyg, Urals and Siberia, thus allowing for their traditionalist belief to be successfully preserved.

The textual, literary preservation and textual creation of Old believers made their cultural-religious resistance successful to a very large extent. As Robert Crummey argued, Old Believers were able to establish an extensive system of book copying particularly in the Vyg community (Crummey, 1970, p.98). This allowed Old Believer writings to be accessed by their sympathisers outside of the Old Believer communities and this led to Old Believer beliefs being spread throughout Russia through the books, which meant that their Russian Traditionalist Orthodox beliefs were preserved successfully.

Moreover, the hand-copying of Biblical texts such as that of the Book of Apocalypse (see Figure 2), allowed not only for pre-Nikonian texts to be preserved but also for Old Believer traditionalist beliefs to be maintained despite the Russian state confiscating pre-Nikonian texts (Vlasova, 2011, p.116). The hand-copying also solved the priest-less problem that Old Believers faced. Bespopovtsy Old Believers (Priest-less) had no ordained clergy (Crummey, 1970, p.23) to lead worship or interpret scripture. Therefore, for local communities to be able to run their own services and defend their beliefs, they needed physical copies of the texts in hand. In this way, copying Biblical texts put scriptures directly into the hands of laypeople, the unordained members of a church, who then could lead worship for the rest of their communities, thus successfully preserving the traditionalist Orthodox belief of Old Believers even without ordained clergy members.

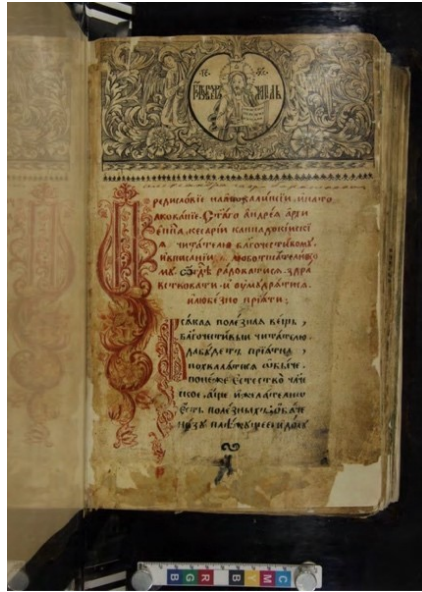


Figure 2: XIV.42p/421 *Apokalipsis s tolkovaniiami Andreia Kesariiskogo* [Apocalypse with the Commentary of Andrew of Caesarea], manuscript, illuminated, second half of the 18th century, 2°, Ural Federal University

Additionally, the creation of the three cornerstone texts of early Old Believer Literature, namely: Andrei Denisov's "The Pomorian Answers", Semen Denisov's "Russian Vineyard" and the Life of Archpriest Avvakum, was essential for the preservation of Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief to a very large extent. The Pomorian Answers, primarily authored by Andrei Denisov (Pomorskie otvety, 18th century), was a written defence against the 106 questions posed to the Old Believers on disputed matters of ritual and doctrine by the state-church emissary Ieromonakh Neofit. The Pomorian Answers managed to successfully preserve Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief by presenting an intellectual line of belief to the Old Believers against the state Orthodox Church. As Robert Crummey argues, the Pomorian Answers was a polemical weapon that made the Old Believers more than a match for the spokesmen of the state church (Crummey, 1970, p.97), in this way the Pomorian Answers provided the Old Believers with an ideological line of defense behind which they could successfully preserve their pre-Nikonian ritual and belief.

The Russian Vineyard, written by Semen Denisov, was a martyrology recounting the early leaders and sufferers of Old Belief who died for the old faith (Denisov, 18th century). Robert Crummey argued that historical writings such as the Russian Vineyard gave faithful assurance to the Old Believers that they were the true heirs of the Russian saints of the past (Crummey, 1970, p.97). Therefore, it showed to Old Believers that they were the last protectors of the uncorrupted Russian Orthodoxy and thus gave a divine justification to their preservation of traditionalist Russian Orthodoxy, allowing them to preserve their traditionalist belief

successfully, through their increased resistance to the reforms that were introduced by Patriarch Nikon.

The Life of Archpriest Avvakum was the autobiography of Protopope Avvakum Petrov, who was one of the earliest leaders of the resistance to the Nikonian reforms. By showing that Avvakum did not yield despite enduring immense suffering through exile, losing his child, beatings, and the Pustozersk pit, it gave a clear example to all Old Believers on how to resist persecution as Avvakum presented himself to Old Believers as a model martyr (Avvakum, 1904). Therefore, Avvakum, through presenting himself as a martyr for the Old Believer cause, showed that traditionalist Orthodox belief was more important than life itself. Thus, it allowed for Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief to be preserved successfully as it not only unified the scattered Old Believer movement under a shared founding martyr, giving Old Believers a shared sense of identity. It also prevented the beliefs of Old Believers from being altered as Avvakum had died for specific pre-Nikonian rituals such as the two-fingered blessing. Therefore, altering these rituals would have meant dishonouring Avvakum's death, so his martyrdom protected Old Believer ritual and belief from being distorted, leading to it being preserved successfully to a large extent.

In addition, the apocalyptic worldview of Old Believers made their cultural-religious resistance successful to a large extent. As Cherniavsky argued, the Old Believers found only one general conclusion to be possible that “if Moscow, the Third Rome, had instituted religious changes which required the condemnation of itself in its own past, then Moscow had accepted heresy and so the end was at hand” (Cherniavsky, 1966, p.13). Therefore, they believed themselves to be the faithful remnant that would safeguard true Orthodoxy until the apocalypse as Crummey had argued (Crummey, 1970, p.97). In this way, Old Believers cast the leaders of the reformed Orthodoxy, the Tsar and the Patriarch, as being the precursor, as Antichrist himself, or as the Beast of the Apocalypse (Cherniavsky, 1966, p.13). This Old Believer view fuelled their resistance as they believed that if they were to not defend and preserve their beliefs against people they thought were “guiding the work of the Antichrist” (Cherniavsky, 1966, p.13) then the entire world would end. Thus, for Old Believers to achieve personal salvation at the end of time they needed to resist the reforms and preserve their traditionalist Orthodox belief, which they viewed as the only remaining true Orthodoxy. This desire for personal salvation at the time of the apocalypse led to hardened Old Believer resistance to all the reforms of the state Orthodoxy, thus making their preservation of Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief

successful, as for them continued belief in the pre-reform Orthodoxy was the only way to achieve salvation.

That said, it is important to note that there were complications that limited the overall success of the cultural-religious resistance of the Old Believers. The very coherence of this resistance is itself a historiographical question. Michels holds that early Old Belief was “by no means a monolithic movement,” criticising the older Soviet portrayal of a unified mass protest; on this view, its later unity was partly a retrospective construction (Michels, 1999, p.14). Yet Kivelson cautions that the fragmentation Michels finds may reflect the evasions of interrogated peasants and the tropes of hagiographers as much as historical reality (Kivelson, 2002, p.208). The shared oppositional identity Crummey documents suggests a cohesion nonetheless real enough to sustain the tradition. That cohesion, however, was oppositional rather than doctrinal and on matters of doctrine the movement was genuinely divided, most consequentially in the split between Popovtsy (Priestly) and Bespopovtsy (Priest-Less), which limited the success of their liturgical and ritual preservation. The Popovtsy Old Believers, as Crummey argued, were able to maintain “the full liturgical observances of Orthodoxy by taking in priests of Nikonian consecration who would undergo ritual purification to cleanse themselves of apostasy” (Crummey, 1970, p.23) and thus were able to maintain the full sacramental life of pre-Nikonian Orthodoxy. The Bespopovtsy, however, rejected such a compromise, as Crummey argued, with no Nikonian priest being acceptable to them under any circumstances (Crummey, 1970, p.23). Therefore, this rejection of ordained priests meant that the Bespopovtsy could not maintain the full sacramental structure of pre-Nikonian Christianity. This is evident in the fact that Bulgakov argues that “apart from baptism and confession performed by laymen, often even by women, all the other sacraments are not performed at all” (Bulgakov, 1913, p.77). Therefore, it can be argued that the cultural-religious resistance was overall limited due to the Bespopovtsy not being able to maintain the full sacramental structure in the same way as the Popovtsy sect. Nonetheless, it should be noted that whilst the split between Popovtsy and Bespopovtsy did limit to some extent their cultural-religious resistance against the state church, Crummey does argue that all of the Old Believer sects “stood in opposition to the state church and the government. When threatened by their enemies, they laid aside their internecine quarrels and presented a remarkably united front to the outside world” (Crummey, 1970, p.23). This shows that the differing Old Believer sects, despite their differences in sacramental structure, were able to successfully unite against the state Orthodoxy by preserving their shared pre-Nikonian rituals, icons, and biblical texts.

Overall, the cultural-religious resistance of the Old Believers was largely successful in preserving Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief. Their icon-painting schools, monopoly on cast icons, extensive book-copying, foundational literature, and apocalyptic worldview together successfully preserved pre-Nikonian ritual, text, and identity across two centuries of persecution. However, the Popovtsy–Bespopovtsy split did limit the sacramental completeness of that preservation, as the Bespopovtsy could not preserve the full sacramental structure. Nonetheless, the shared oppositional identity of the Old Believers meant that their resistance was highly successful in preserving their Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief.

Secondly, the socio-economic adaptation of the Old Believers consisted of two main strands: their internal solidarity and their specialisation. Their internal solidarity between Old Believers preserved their Old Belief successfully by creating an independent economic base for Old Believers. This economic base was characterised, as Rusanov argued, through the Old Believer system of “intragroup interest-free loans” (Rusanov, n.d., p.9). For example, the Nosov brothers obtaining a huge loan of 500,000 rubles from the Preobrazhenskoe cemetery commune with no interest to pay for the first three years (Rusanov, n.d., p.9). This internal solidarity between Old Believers meant that an Old Believer could raise capital, find employment, and receive relief from within the confession. This meant that they were never forced into dependence on the state Orthodox Church, leading to the Old Belief not being eroded. Moreover, this internal solidarity also meant that successful Old Believer businessmen like the Nosovs could make contributions back to their communes (Rusanov, n.d., p.9). Blackwell argued that the Preobrazhensk community was “a refuge for the needy and the elderly supported by contributions of the faithful and the wealthy, given to enable the community to continue its charitable works and to spread the Theodosian teaching” (Blackwell, 1968, p.216). Therefore, the wealth given by the Old Believer businessmen helped their communes to propagate their Old Belief and to sustain their communes as religious centres, thus successfully preserving their Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief, through the wealth accumulated through internal solidarity.

Moreover, the specialisation of Old Believers allowed them to preserve their Old Belief successfully through their concentration in craft, trade, and industry. This specialisation is clear as Blackwell states that “Vyg became a federation consisting of a large number of industrial and agricultural communities and subsequently expanded from agriculture and ironmaking until it handled much of the fishing, whaling, and commercial activity of the north” (Blackwell, 1968, p.215). This Old Believer specialisation in industry was particularly crucial to their

preservation as when during the Great Northern War, Peter I needed iron, he, as Crummey noted “was ready to allow the community to manage its own affairs if its members contributed to the development of the new state iron factories” (Crummey, 1970, p.69). This protection from persecution that the Old Believer Vyg community was able to achieve as part of this compromise meant that through the Old Believer specialisation in industry, the Vyg community was allowed to remain autonomous and to exist openly as Old Believers. Therefore, as Old Believers were able to maintain their Old Belief, their specialisation made their preservation of Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief successful as the Vyg community, whilst working for the state was not persecuted for their belief.

However, it is important to note that there were complications that limited the overall success of the socio-economic adaptation of the Old Believers. It can be argued that whilst Peter I did allow Old Believers in the Vyg community to remain autonomous, he did tax Old Believers more heavily as Crummey notes that “all adherents of the old faith were to pay double the amount of capitation tax normally paid by people of their social class” (Crummey, 1970, p.80) and that “A law of 1722 decreed that anyone who kept his beard had, in addition to paying the fifty-ruble annual tax, to wear old-fashioned clothes” (Crummey, 1970, p.81). This directly targeted the fact that for Old Believers beards were strictly sacred and a fundamental part of their Orthodox faith (The Russian Orthodox Old Believer Church, 2018). Therefore, it can be argued that this heavy taxation on Old Believers did limit the success of their socio-economic adaptation, as it did weaken the economic base of the Old Believers that was funding the preservation of their belief.

Nonetheless, despite the heavy taxation, it is necessary to address the fact that whilst the double capitation and beard tax did weaken the economic base of the Old Believers, it also acted as a way in which Old Believers were recognised officially by the state as a legally defined group. As for the double capitation tax to target Old Believers specifically, the state had to acknowledge the permanent and legal nature of the Old Believers, thus allowing their traditionalist Orthodox belief to be preserved successfully due to their recognised permanence. Moreover, as Crummey notes, the “admiralty itself paid the taxes on behalf of the Old Believers” (Crummey, 1970, p.90), as the Vyg Old Believers were their employees. Therefore, it can be argued that the taxation instead demonstrated the success of the Old Believer socio-economic adaptation as through their specialisation in industry, the Vyg Old Believers were able to evade the double capitation taxation, highlighting the success of the Old Believer socio-economic adaptation.

Overall, the socio-economic adaptation of the Old Believers was highly successful in preserving Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief. Their internal solidarity built an independent economic base through the interest-free communal loans that freed them from dependence on the state church, whilst the wealth it generated sustained their communes as religious centres and propagated their faith. Their specialisation in industry brought protection, most notably at Vyg, where their service of supplying the state with iron ore and lime secured autonomy and even exemption from the double tax. Notably, the heavy taxation on the Old Believers did not limit their socio-economic adaptation drastically, as it specifically forced the state to recognise their permanence.

In conclusion, between 1666 and 1917, the Old Believers preserved Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief to a great extent. Their cultural-religious resistance sustained the pre-Nikonian rite through icons, texts, and liturgy. Whilst the Nevyansk iconography school and the cast-icon monopoly kept the old icon styles alive, the Vyg scriptorium preserved the old texts and the foundational works of the Denisov brothers and Avvakum created both an intellectual and religious justification for the preservation of Old Belief. The apocalyptic conviction that they alone guarded true Orthodoxy further hardened their resistance against the Holy Synod. Their socio-economic adaptation reinforced this as their communal solidarity built an independent economic base that freed them from dependence on the state church, whilst their specialisation in industry brought the autonomy, most notably at Vyg, where Old Belief was not persecuted and thus was able to be preserved.

The success of the preservation of the Old Belief was real but not without limitations. The Popovtsy–Bespopovtsy split did mean that for the Bespopovtsy, full sacramental structure was not achieved, and heavy taxation and persecution imposed genuine threats on the economic base of the Old Believers. However, these limitations never led to preservation failing. The state's own measures, by defining and taxing the Old Believers, conceded their permanence. Whilst edinoverie in 1800 confirmed their survival, the 1906 Decree on Old Believer communities finally granted Old Believers the religious freedom they did not have since the Raskol. These reforms clearly show that the Old Believers had, after two and a half centuries of persecution, managed to successfully preserve their Russian traditionalist Orthodox belief.

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