



THE IMPACT OF RELIGION ON ETHNIC SURVIVAL: RUSSIAN OLD BELIEVERS IN ALASKA

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Historical and cultural geographers have long been interested in the processes of immigrant settlement and subsequent cultural change (Joerg, 1932; Jordan, 1966; Mannion, 1974, 1977; McQuillan, 1978; Ostergren, 1988; Swrerenga, 1985). However, except for limited studies of ethnicity in the central United States, very little has been accomplished to date on the significant relationship between religion and ethnic retention and sense of place (Jordan, 1980; Ostergren, 1981; Legreid and Ward, 1982). Russian Old Believers in North America offer a particularly fascinating case study for an investigation of the role of religion as a key variable in culture change. For over three hundred years, in Russia, China, South America, and the United States, Old Believers have maintained their Russian language, their religious beliefs, and their traditional lifestyle while living within very different, dominant majority cultures (Colfer, 1985; Smithson, 1976). Will they continue to

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maintain their distinctive cultural and religious identity in Alaska in the 1990s?

Regional Setting

The tip of the Kenai Peninsula can barely be seen in the thick coastal fog. Glaciated peaks, fiorded coasts, and roaring mountain streams dominate first impressions of this rolling, spruce-covered landscape. Old Believer settlements in Alaska are located in isolated, inaccessible places in three regions of the state of Alaska including Kenai forests, the Matanuska Valley, and islands just north of Kodiak (Figure 1). The largest community, Nikolaevsk, with approximately sixty families, is near the southernmost tip of the Kenai Peninsula and is connected to the small towns of Anchor Point and Homer by challenging dirt roads. Other Kenai villages, also on dirt and gravel roads barely accessible even by hardy four wheel drive vehicles, lie "up Kachemak Bay" on a narrow coastal strip atop a steep bayside escarpment. Old Believers have also begun to settle remote islands just north of Kodiak, accessible only by sea plane or boat. These villages offer the cultural geographer an opportunity to study Russian culture and religion in an isolated, real life setting and thus provide an excellent opportunity to observe the processes of religious and cultural change firsthand. Four aspects of Old Believer culture are considered here: religious origins, migration patterns, lifestyle and cultural retention, and the religious landscape.

Origin of the Old Believers

Before an analysis of the Alaskan Old Believer landscape is possible, it is necessary to understand their origin and diffusion from their homeland. Russia, long a loose conglom-



Figure 1.

erate of diverse principalities, accepted Christianity in 988 when Prince Vladimir of Kiev forced people into the Dnepr River for mass baptism (Steeves, 1989). The Russian people were instructed to give up their “pagan ways” and become part of the Eastern Christian Church of Byzantium. Over time, the Russian clergy assumed more and more authority over the masses. After 1453, Moslems conquered the city of Constantinople and Greek and Russian monks realized Moscow was their only hope for maintaining the pure Orthodox faith. Thereafter, the Orthodox Church controlled education, religion, and almost all aspects of the lives of the Russian people. Education and book copying was confined to monasteries.

In 1551, the Council of the Stoglav met to discuss church translations and doctrine. Their decisions ultimately were

published as law. This Council decided that numerous church books were faulty and people should only use corrected versions. Their decisions became a large scale problem after the printing press was introduced in 1552 to print religious books. Wider distribution of printed material meant that variations and discrepancies in texts became more obvious to more people.

But the real debate began when Nikon, an extremely conservative parish priest, was appointed patriarch by Tsar Alexis in 1651. Nikon wanted certain reforms to realign the Russian Orthodox Church more closely to the original precepts of the Greek Church. He insisted on the revised church books, he had new ideas on the number of hallelujahs sung during worship services, and he changed the number of fingers used to make the sign of the cross. On top of these radical changes in church doctrine, Nikon was an offensively arrogant person. In the end, his insistence on a revised sign of the cross most angered the Russian people. Since they made the symbolic sign many times every day, this became Nikon's most offensive change. In addition, he insisted on changing the spelling of the name Christ. Public outrage resulted in another significant meeting of the official Church Council in 1666 (Conybeare, 1962; Kolarz, 1961; Miliukov, 1943; Zenkovsky, 1957). Rumors circulated wildly. Some said this was the coming of the anti-Christ, the end of the world. Eventually the Council stripped Nikon of his powers, but it did make his reforms law. Since the government punished those who did not comply with changes, thousands of people were persecuted and arrested. Mass movements against changes came to be known as *stary obrian* and *staraya vera* (old belief). Many dissenters, now called "Old Ritualists" (Staroobriadtsy) and "Old Believers" (Starover), chose to become martyrs rather than surrender to soldiers. Thousands of Old Believers were killed and their homes and churches burned. By the end of the seventeenth

century, one group migrated to Romania. Some eventually went to Turkey where they fished and farmed and built small communities. Many thousands fled to Siberia.

Again, in 1917, the Russian Civil War disrupted the lives of Old Believers. Small groups of them emigrated wherever they could. Those in the Asian region of Altai fled across the border into the Sinjiang Province of China. Those in Siberia and the Far East resettled in Harbin, Manchuria. By the end of World War II, Soviet forces had moved into the border lands of China. Many Old Believers were forced into trucks and driven back across the border into the Soviet Union. In 1949, the Communist revolution in China resulted in the collectivization of thousands of Old Believers into villages. Their plight drew the attention of the World Council of Churches who secured visas and funds to help them emigrate. Old Believers from both Sinjiang and Manchuria came together in Hong Kong and prepared to resettle in Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. The majority went to Brazil and resettled on land donated by the Brazilian government. But these were hard years for the emigres. They could not supplement their farm income with handcrafts because of local economic restrictions, it was too hot for traditional Russian crops, and fears of the spread of communism from nearby Chile worried them. In 1964, the Tolstoy Foundation arranged for the Old Believers to resettle in the United States. At the same time, Old Believers from Turkey also migrated to North America. Most went to a region of rich farmland in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, near the town of Woodburn, a place they had heard of from Russian Molokans when they stopped in the Los Angeles harbor on their way to Brazil many years before.

Oregon's semi-rural environment also soon proved difficult for many of the Old Believers as American culture began to dominate their children's values and lifestyles. As

a result of these fears, five families left Oregon for Canada and Alaska in 1968, settling along the Plat River in northern Alberta and on the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska in 1968 (Figure 2).

Alaskan Migration and Settlement

The difficult trip from Oregon to Alaska was nothing new for the Old Believers. As described above, for over three hundred years, they victims of religious persecution had been seeking resettlement sites where they could maintain their traditional way of life and practice their religion in peace. Five Russian families originally left Woodburn, Oregon in heavily laden pickup trucks bound for yet another new life on the Kenai Peninsula. By 1990, at least ninety families resided in the area with over 1000 Old Believers living in six small settlements. Nikolaevsk, their original settlement, remains the largest and most "liberal" by local definitions (Moore, 1990). Due to a religious schism in the village, Old Believers founded four other villages nearby: Dolina, Rozdolna, Voznesenko, and Kachemak Selo. They have also expanded to the Matanuska Valley north of Anchorage as well as south on Raspberry Island near Kodiak.

With a loan from the Tolstoy Foundation in New York, Old Believers in Alaska originally purchased 640 acres of government-owned spruce forests on the Kenai Peninsula. Nikolaevsk, named for the important Orthodox saint Nicholas, grew and prospered for fifteen years as more families migrated from Oregon. Homes, roads, fences, and even a new state-funded school were built (Figure 3). Early settlers worked in nearby Homer fish canneries, the marina at Kachemak Bay, and in small construction crews in the area. However, fishing soon became the primary economic support for the new emigres. Today, at least ninety per cent of

RUSSIAN OLD BELIEVER MIGRATION ROUTES

Figure 2.

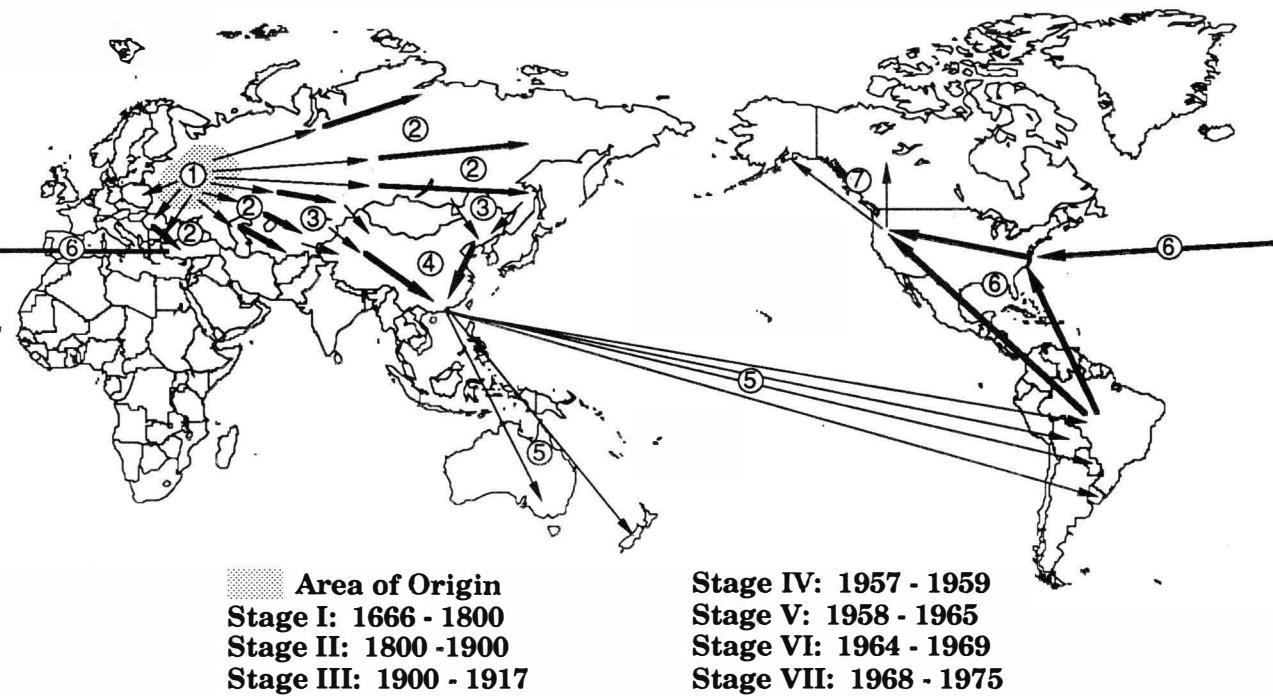




Figure 3. Nikolaevsk School

Alaskan Old Believer men fish for a living (Gay, 1988). Most are drift gillnetters in Cook Inlet, Bristol Bay, or Prince William Sound. Some fish for halibut in the Gulf of Alaska. Many learned carpentry skills in the lumbering industry in Oregon, and build and maintain their own boats (Figure 4). Harbors like this one at Ninilchik are filled with boats named the *Zion*, and the *Amur*. Russian settlers in Alaska prefer employment in the fishing industry because it offers them the opportunity to be their own bosses, work independently, and have the option of not working on the numerous religious holidays each year.

Lifestyle and Cultural Retention

Russian Old Believers in Alaska continue to maintain their traditional lifestyle within the larger context of American life. Although Nikolaevsk and other villages lie



Figure 4. Old Believer Boats in the Ninilchik Harbor

far away from American mainstream culture, nearby towns are within driving distance and public school dominates the children's daily lives. Traditional Russian peasant clothing continues to be worn by all village residents, although young people may be seen with American T-shirts and Levi jackets pulled down over their embroidered Russian shirts and woven belts. The Russian language is spoken by children playing on village streets, in homes, and at church services (Figure 5).

Automobiles and the educational system are now the most potent agents of change among Russian Old Believers in Alaska. Bad weather limits the seasonal use of pickups, although high powered, fancy trucks are used regularly to drive to nearby fishing boats. The Nikolaevsk School is new and modern, housing grades K-12. Classroom teachers and counselors do not openly contest the religious ideas of Old Believer children, but exposure to new ideologies and "for-



Figure 5. Children Playing on the Streets of Nikolaevsk

eign" concepts, as well as daily training in the English language are reasonably expected to have a long term effect on cultural and religious retention among the Staroverы. Interviews with the principal and staff at Nikolaevsk School in 1990 revealed that two students from their school were currently attending the University of Oregon, a first for the Old Believers. This exposure to higher education will likewise serve as a potential agent of change in the community.

While these social and cultural forces act against preservation of Russian culture in Old Believer enclaves, religion acts as an integrating counterforce. During the centuries of Staroverы migration and resettlement, spiritual beliefs have held Old Believer culture together. Today's cultural landscape reflects the importance of religion in their everyday lifestyle.

Russian Religious Expression in the Cultural Landscape

Old Believers are fundamental Christians who believe in a literal translation of the Bible. They also maintain strict lifestyle prohibitions based on their religious beliefs. Men cannot shave and women must always cover their heads in public (Figure 6). A handmade, woven belt is tied around every child's waist at their baptism which must be worn for the rest of their lives. Believers do not eat meat, dairy products, or any animal product on religious holidays and for a prescribed number of weeks before Christmas and Easter. Outsiders are viewed as "unclean" and may not share a meal or common dishes with Staroveries. These day to day practices along with numerous other lifestyle requirements



Figure 6. Russian Woman at Nikolaevsk

dictated by their religion clearly set Old Believer culture apart from mainstream American culture.

But not all Starovey in Alaska agree on all lifestyle issues. The old adage, "Two Russians, ten opinions" describes recent events in Nikolaevsk. As in other Russian communities in other places, the Alaskan Old Believers disagree frequently during decision-making. As in any community, some members of the faith are more conservative than others. Some see education as a dangerous force, others support the expansion of Nikolaevsk School. There have also been major disagreements about religious doctrine in recent years.

One of the most critical issues within Alaskan Old Believer congregations has concerned the leadership of trained clergy. After the great schism of 1666, no monasteries existed to train priests, so the Staroverov have been practicing their religion with lay leaders for several centuries. However, in the 1970s, several of the residents of Nikolaevsk decided to send one of their young men to a recently discovered monastery in Romania. Upon his return to the village, a division occurred between residents who wanted to follow the priest and those who did not. In 1983, opinions became so extreme that violence caused Alaskan State Troopers to come to Nikolaevsk and a local judge ordered the Old Believer church closed until a resolution could be found. Today, after fires, threats, and the rebuilding of two churches across the street from each other, village residents seem to have reached a truce (Figure 7). However, this religious schism was the primary reason for the founding of four new settlements near Kachemak Bay. Interviews with local residents of Nikolaevsk, Dolina, and Voznesenko revealed that a strained relationship continues to exist between families in the various communities.

Because of this spiritual and cultural division among Old Believers in Alaska, the potential long term potency of reli-



Figure 7. Russian Orthodox Church at Nikolaevsk

gion as a unifying force is being minimized. The overall strength of Starover culture has long depended on the unity of their religious ideals. Although strict observance of religious beliefs and church doctrine continue to dominate their daily lives, divisions within the group have already created new rifts between and among villages. All culture groups continually are effected by both centripetal and centrifugal forces that tend to separate or unify their members. Such is the case among rural Old Believers in Alaska.

Conclusions

But internal issues such as religious practices, the increased mobility caused by trucks and automobiles, and the educational system are not the only active forces for change among Old Believers. Several external forces have also been

at work. Much of the overall physical and human environment has changed since the late 1960s when Russian migrants first arrived on the Kenai Peninsula. When the settlement of Nikolaevsk was founded in 1968, the nearest towns of Anchor Point and Homer were tiny villages of less than 1000 people each. The tsunami triggered by the Alaskan earthquake of 1964 had caused significant damage to the Homer Spit and retarded overall coastal development in the region. When the Old Believers first saw the site of their new home, it was a much less developed place than it is today. In the two and a half decades since the earthquake the area has witnessed increased development of the tourist economy, an expansion of its importance as a sport and commercial fishing center, and a significant increase in its total population. In addition, Old Believers began to subdivide their land in the 1970s as the petroleum industry improved the Alaskan economy. Now, modern new non-Staroveries homes line both sides of Nikolaevsk Road on the way into the village. Old Believers may soon find themselves once again surrounded by the culture they tried to escape when they left Oregon.

In the midst of social and economic development on the Kenai Peninsula, increased mobility due to increased vehicle ownership and improved roads, and fragmentation caused by religious dissension, future cohesion of Old Believer culture is in doubt. For three hundred years the Staroveries have been migrating to new lands in search of religious freedom and an isolated lifestyle. Their culture and beliefs have thus far survived war, poverty, dislocation, and numerous other socioeconomic challenges. Longitudinal studies of this fascinating group of Russians need to be conducted at regular intervals in the near future to document the process of cultural change. Whatever the future holds for this ethno-religious

gious group, the complex patterns of the migration, resettlement, and cultural retention of Russian Old Believers in Alaska thus far can only be viewed as remarkable.



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Dr. Trussell's research on pioneer settlement in particular, was the origin of my long term fascination with immigrant settlement patterns. This paper is a Trussell-inspired study

of settlement and culture change within a little studied and often misunderstood ethno-religious group in the American West, the Russian Old Believers.



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