

The Scar of the Schism: The Image of Old Believers in Late Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature

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In 1881 distinguished Russian publisher and historian P. Bartenev inserted in his magazine a short “Note from the publisher of the *Russian Archive*. On historical novels.” Following the habitual manner of comparing the Russian situation with that in Western Europe, he lamented the abundance of historical novels in Russia. This “unbridled historiographical fancy” could not hurt Europeans, he thought, because they were quite familiar with their past whereas Russians “started their studies only yesterday,” and their “popular self consciousness” was still in its embryo.¹ He enumerated several topics still in need of elucidation, mostly listing the names of the Tsars. Interestingly, the first person that he mentioned was Nikon, a Russian patriarch (1652-1658), whose name is closely connected with the amendment of church books and the persecution of Old Believers.

As a result of the church books’ amendment which began in the seventeenth century, some Russians broke away from the Church. The disagreement was over seemingly minor points: how to spell the name of Jesus, how many times to repeat *alleluia*, or how many fingers to use in making the sign of the cross. As one of the writers noted, this was a movement of simple people “whose whole faith was in those two fingers.” The official church was trying to bring its books and rituals into conformity with Greek originals, while Old Believers adhered to the native Orthodoxy of their forefathers. They suffered persecutions, exile, and death. Entire Old Believer communities, when approached by government troops, would lock themselves up in wooden dwellings and set them alight. But the persecutions did not destroy the movement; the number of

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dissenters continued to increase during the subsequent centuries. Vigilantly seeing to the preservation of ancient customs and rituals for more than two hundred years, they were regarded by some as the bearers of pure, untarnished Russian culture. Because of their adherence to the past, to the old books, and to old Russian orders, they were called Old Believers, Old Ritualists or Schismatics (*Raskol'niki*). In this paper the terms "*Raskol*," "schism," and "Old Belief" are used interchangeably.

There are some firm canons for approaching Russian national consciousness or identity. In Michael Cherniavsky's classic *Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths*, two major pillars of Russian identity are defined as the Orthodoxy (the myth of 'Holy Russia') and the belief in a Christ-like Tsar. Leaning on this primary significance of the Orthodoxy for Russian culture, many studies of Russian intellectual history incessantly explore the West as the only significant Other of Russian national self-perception. However, in the late-nineteenth century, after Herzen's *From the Other Shore*, Leont'ev's articles, and Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer*, when even the thought that "only banality is all-European" had become trite, the West lost its aura of intellectual superiority. The search came closer to home.

Another conspicuous contradiction of Russian national consciousness that received a considerable amount of attention was the one between the "narod" (the people) and the "intelligentsia." Recently, Cathy A. Frierson studied the image of the people created by the populist authors during the 1860s and 1870s. She stressed the two-fold connotation of the term "narod" ("simple people" or "people") for educated Russians: that of "the other" and of the people as a nation.² The starting point of my argument is almost identical: if one sees Orthodoxy as the core of popular self-perception in Russia, a similar duality is conspicuous in the images of Old-Believers: they are alien, queer and, at the same time, genuinely Russian.

But there is more to their otherness. It springs not only from the popular character of their religiosity (which refers us again to the "big picture" oppositions such as "official versus popular religion" and "the intelligentsia versus the people") but also from their adherence to the past, from their being a "stony splinter" of ancient Russian history. This nuance gives them an additional quality and distinguishes them from one indiscernible whole of "the people," making attitude to the past an important component of this image. Such grandiose juxtapositions as "Russia and the West," and "the people and the intelligentsia" are

traditional in Russian thought. It is no wonder that illustrious and thorough elaborations of these topics by Slavophiles and Westernizers, as well as by Dostoevskii, Tolstoi, Blok, and Merezhkovskii among others, have become the focus of many significant works.

This paper is an attempt to erode such clear-cut visions of Russian contradictions. I am certainly not the first one to do so. Jeffrey Brooks, in his analysis of *lubok* literature (cheap editions for the people), pays special attention to the problem of changing Russian identity. According to him, “the question of what it meant to be Russian” was prominent in this kind of literature. He notes that the emphasis had been shifted in the late-nineteenth century from loyalty to the tsar and Orthodoxy to pride in a mighty empire:

Obligations to Church and state still remained, but they no longer served as the primary expression of national identity . . . In the newer view, the most humble Great Russian was invited to think of himself as generally assisting the smaller and culturally backward nationalities that comprised the empire. This provided a sense of pride and status congruent psychologically with the other changes that were part of the greater geographic and economic mobility of common Great Russians at the end of the nineteenth century.³

Brooks explores changes in Russian self-image by showing their intricate connections with Russian colonialism, the “spatial dimension” of Russian identity, so to speak, whereas its “temporal dimension,” the question of popular attitudes towards the Russian past remains untouched. However, the problem of historical memory seems to be at least equally important at this time of Russian self-recognition. I will tackle this issue by examining the theme of religious schism in Russian literature, in particular, the image of Old Believers and sectarians. “The Great Russian Literature” is not the subject of my account – its margins are. Surprisingly, if one turns to the writers whom B. Eikhenbaum called “the younger line, whose work was suppressed and overlooked in the Russian prose of the Dostoevskii and Tolstoi period”⁴ (Dal’, Mel’nikov-Pechersky, Leskov), each representative of this group shows a keen interest in and profound knowledge of the problem of *Raskolniks*. Our sources are the books of popular but “second-rate” writers, along with the articles in “thick” journals.

Until the 1860s, one could hardly meet a *Raskolnik* in Russian literature. During the reign of Nicholas I, using this word in print was

prohibited. Disregard and oppression were the main characteristics of government policies toward Old Believers. Until the reign of Alexander II, Russian society was almost ignorant of the *Raskolniks*; high officials sincerely believed that their number was negligible.⁵ It was at the beginning of this reign that along with a relative easing of the Old Believers' condition, the imperial resolution of 20 January 1858 stressed that an insufficient amount of data concerning the schism was available.⁶ P.I. Mel'nikov, one of the main authorities on the subject, started his highly popular "Letters on the Schism" (1862) with the assertion that neither the administration, nor society, nor even Old Believers themselves, knew what the essence of the two hundred year-old schism was.⁷ During the next twenty years, scholars and officials showered the Russian public with accounts of the Old Believers' historical roots, creative work and current conditions.⁸

Importantly for this investigation, the period of the late-nineteenth century includes the cultural and social upheaval in Old Russia when traditional social groups could hardly find their place in a quickly changing society, and many old norms and values were revised. Rapid social, cultural, and political changes introduced by the Great Reforms made traditional national ideals questionable, leaving no place for romantic beliefs of the Slavophile type. These tendencies resulted in an almost complete rupture with the past in the early-twentieth century when prominent historian Mikhail Gershenzon wrote: "Unlike Slavophiles, we are growing in a different way – catastrophically."⁹ A feverish search for some pillars of national identity in the past preceded these laments. It was this search that Bartenev described in his "note on historical novels." It is this search that I am trying to trace and analyze.

For an average enlightened nineteenth-century publicist, the problem was simple and self-explanatory: Old Belief as a fruit of ignorance, as a meaningless love of the old times, and as a dull adherence to stony customs was doomed. It was obvious that the enlightenment would eventually crush ignorance and thereby Old Belief would lose its basis. But even for such optimistic critics, the problem of the true Russianness of Old Believers was important. If they were to be ultimately defeated, Russian society stood to lose this last stronghold of genuine Russian culture. So in some disputes on the schism, one can easily trace worry concerning Russian spiritual sustainability.

During the liberal 1860s, the most popular approach to the Old Belief was that developed by the inexhaustible Afanasii Shchapov. Son of

a poor village sexton and a native woman from the Irkutsk region in Southeastern Siberia, in 1846, as the best graduate of Irkutsk Theological Seminary, he was enrolled in the Kazan' Theological Academy. Possessing a legendary capacity for work, he spent an average of seventeen hours a day at his writing desk, his boots forming depressions in the floor. Fellow students used to come to his room to see this miracle.¹⁰ He chose "Russian schism of the Old Belief" as a subject of his Master's dissertation, which appeared as a book in two editions in 1858 and 1859.

Written within the precincts of the theological seminary by a liberal-minded young student, the work was certainly controversial. Trying to meet the requirements of church history, it also contained elements of psychological and sociological explanation for the origin of the Old Belief. In subsequent years, other liberal authors developed these elements. Shchapov himself, in a later article, completely rejected the traditional, strictly religious interpretation of the *Raskol* in favor of a sociological one, defining it as people's opposition to the social order, to the growing political pressure of the central powers. V.V. Andreev further developed this position:

As a resistance to innovations, *raskol* would be incomprehensible if studied in the religious sphere only. Indeed, Russian *raskol* appeared in equal measure in all the spheres of people's everyday life. Innovations, especially abrupt and unexpected ones, met with a repulse. This repulse was characteristic for the indigenous Russian part of *zemstvo*, that part which rebuffed Mongolian rule and eastern customs and later was ready to give the same repulse to the western innovations. This part of the population treasured everything Russian, whatever it was. Nobility was mostly of foreign origin and alien to this milieu . . . which consisted mostly of the merchants and peasants.¹¹

According to Andreev, the presence of different persuasions in Old Belief was a consequence of local (historical and ethnographic) peculiarities. At this troublesome time, when Orthodox priests were uneasy about the strengthening of the Old Belief,¹² such a sociological approach to what was considered a part of the Church history certainly harmed the image of the Russian Orthodox religiosity. But it was just a beginning. Popular historian N.I. Kostomarov wrote in 1871 that *Raskol* "was an important phenomenon in people's mental progress." It "stirred up a dreaming mind in the Russian man."¹³ The title of Kostomarov's article was very simple,

“The history of *Raskol* [written] by *Raskolniks*,” and its subject was quite innocent: a digest of the history of schism written by an Old Believer.¹⁴ But the scholar supplied this article with an extensive, stimulating historical introduction, which “stirred up” minds and caused many people to take a new look at the age-old problem of the Russian schism.

First, Kostomarov sweeps aside predominant opinion about the congruency of *Raskol* and old Russia. In old Russia, commoners were indifferent to and even cold towards religion, implying that Old Believers’ zeal, their devotion to the grandfathers’ rituals, marked their break with the traditional Russian attitude. So the famous professor concludes that *Raskol* “is a new phenomenon, alien to the old Russia.”¹⁵ Other links in Kostomarov’s chain of paradoxes are the following: Old Belief in itself was feeble but very frightening because it could easily “stick” to any people’s unrest. *Raskol* embodied people’s attempts to break away from darkness and mental stagnation; it was an organ of popular self-education. But at the present moment, enlightenment was the only means to eradicate *Raskol*.

Kostomarov’s paradoxes continued to develop psychological interpretation of the Old Belief, elements of which first appeared in Shchapov’s dissertation. Another publicist, Iuzov, asserted that strengthening of the *Raskol* showed the failure of the society to satisfy some “vital spiritual needs of a person.”¹⁶ People willing to avoid spiritual death had only one path to follow: that of *Raskol*. In that way, *Raskol* absorbed “the best vital juices of the Russian people.” As a proof, he cites old Believers’ song:

A soul is waiting for its food.
It needs to quench the thirst.
Try not to leave your soul hungry.¹⁷

In Iuzov’s opinion, the study of the *Raskol* is necessary for any public figure:

The period of the social experiments over silent masses is passing, and we finally realized that improvements in the social system had to be founded on the profound study of the nature of those personalities which constitute the given society; only in this case will the reforms succeed. The intellectual and moral peculiarities of our people became apparent for the most part in the *Raskol*.¹⁸

An ethnographer and a future member of the Socialist-Revolutionary

party, A.S. Prugavin begins his article with a similar idea: the spiritual and moral life of the Russian people is still as unknown as it was one hundred years earlier. Meanwhile, *Raskol*, along with peasant commune, is the most vivid phenomenon of the people's historical life. The most gifted people go into the *Raskol*. The reason for this? "In the church and school people see only uniforms, scholasticism, pedantry."¹⁹

Vikhrov, the protagonist of Pisemsky's novel *Liudi sorokovykh godov* (People of the forties), expresses a similar thought. He asks, "What is *Raskol* in Russia? Is it a political party? No. A religious conviction? No. A sect hiding some vicious passions? No. What is it? It is just a disposition of the Russian heart and mind. It is our own understanding of Christianity, which was not learned from the Greeks."²⁰

So authors from liberal and revolutionary camps viewed the Old Belief in a very positive way, whether it was seen as an ultimate expression of the Russian spirit or a social opposition to the central powers. As for conservative authors, for them it was a nuisance. For example, D.L. Mordovtsev in a popular historical novel *Velikii raskol* (The Great Schism) calls the *Raskol* "a moral epidemic" because "suffering for an idea is morally contagious."²¹

One of the most interesting Soviet philosophers, M.K. Mamar-dashvili, once called Russia "the country of eternal pregnancy," meaning that its problems were never solved, its crises and revolutions never ended up in the delivery of something new.²² This is quite applicable in this case. Suddenly the Russian public discovered a large group of people (approximately ten million by some estimates) who were Russian but did not belong to the Orthodox Church. But this excellent opportunity for rediscovering and redefining the Russian identity was not taken. The scar of the schism did not disappear.

Endnotes

1. P. Bartenev, "Ob istoricheskikh romahakh. Zametka izdatelia Russkogo Arkhiva," *Russkii Arkhiv*, No. 3 (1881): 214.
2. Cathy A. Frierson, *Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 33.

3. J. Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 245.
4. Boris Eikhenbaum, "O proze Kuzmina," in *O literature* (Moskva: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1987), 348.
5. V.V. Andreev, *Raskol i ego znachenie v narodnoi russkoi istorii* (1870; Osnabruck: Otto Zeller, 1965), 352-353. Andreev cited examples showing that the number of Old Believers in Nikolaevan census was underestimated by about ten times.
6. Andreev, *Raskol i ego znachenie v narodnoi russkoi istorii*, 365.
7. Pavel I. Mel'nikov (Andrei Pechersky), "Pis'ma o raskole," in *Sobranie Sochinenii v 6-ti tomakh*, t. 6 (Moskva: Pravda, 1963), 193.
8. Andreev, *Raskol i ego znachenie v russkoi narodnoi istorii*; N. Barsov, *Duchovnye stichi sekty liudei Bozhiikh*. (1870); G. Esipov, *Raskol' nich'i dela XVIII stoletia* (1861-63); I. Popov, *Sbornik dlia isrorii syarobriadstva v 2-kh t* (Moskva, 1864); N. I. Kostomarov "Istoriia raskola u raskol'nikov," *Vestnik Evropy*, No. 4 (1871); F.V. Livanov, *Raskol'niki I ostrozhniki* 4t. (1873); P.I. Mel'nikov-Pecherskii, "Pis'ma o raskole," *Severnaia Pchela*, No. 5,7,9,10,14,15, (1872); "Starobriadcheskie arkhieiei i Ocherki popovshchiny," *Russkii Vestnik* (1863-66); *Sbornik Kel'sieva*, 2 vols. (London 1860-61); A.P. Shchapov, *Russkii raskol starobriadchestva* (Kazan', 1859); *Zemstvo i raskol* (1861); *Umstvennyia napravleniia russkogo raskola*. Andreev states that there were plenty of articles published during the sixties in the church journals (*Khristianskoe Chtenie*, *Pravoslavnyi Sobesednik*, *Pravoslavnoe Obozrenie*, *Dukh Khristianina*).
9. Mikhail O. Gershenzon, *Griboedovskaia Moskva. P. Ia. Chaadaev. Ocherki proshlogo* (Moskva: Moskovskii Rabochii, 1989), 315.
10. Nikolai Ia. Aristov, *Afanasii Prokof'evich Shchapov* (A. S. Suvorina, 1883), 9.
11. Andreev, *Raskol i ego znachenie v narodnoi russkoi istorii*, 76-77.
12. See Gregory L. Freeze, *The Parish Clergy in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 269, 366, 370, 421, 424-5. Freeze relates the following episode: when provincial priest I. S. Belliustin published articles with similar ideas (depicting the Church and Old Belief as two "parties"), he was subject to "the investigation that lasted over a year and nearly ended in Belliustin's defrocking" (394).

13. N.I. Kostomarov, "Istoriia raskola u raskol'nikov," *Sobranie sochinenii*, kn. 5, t. XII (M. M. Stasiulevicha, 1903), 212. This was first published in *Vestnik Evropy*, No. 4 (1871).
14. Pavel Liubopynyi, *Khronologicheskoe iadro starobriadcheskoi tserkvi, ob'iasniaiushchee vse otlichnyia ikh deianiia s 1650-1819 g.* [manuscript].
15. Kostomarov, "Istoriia raskola u raskol'nikov," 232.
16. I. Iuzov, *Russkie dissidenty. Starovery i dukhovnye khristiane* (1881), 5.
17. Iuzov, *Russkie dissidenty. Starovery i dukhovnye khristiane*, 110.
18. Iuzov, *Russkie dissidenty. Starovery i dukhovnye khristiane*, 5.
19. A.S. Prugavin, "Znachenie sektantstva v russkoi narodnoi zhizni," *Ruskaia mysl'*, No. 1 (1881): 312.
20. A.F. Pisemsky, *Sobranie sochinenii v deviaty tomakh*, t. 5 (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Pravda," 1959), 250.
21. D.L. Mordovtsev, *Velikii raskol: Istoricheskii roman iz epokhi tsarstvovaniia Alekseia Mikhailovicha* (Moskva: Sovramennik, 1994), 329.
22. Mikhail Berg, "V strane vechnoi beremennosti," *Literatunaia gazeta*, No. 14 (1994): 3.

