The Old Believers in the United States

By ANTON S. BELIAJEFF

No one knows exactly when the first Old Orthodox arrived in the United States of America. The Old Orthodox, also called Old Believers, are those who maintain the traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church as they were before the changes introduced by Patriarch Nikon in the middle of the seventeenth century. It is reasonably certain that the first groups of Old Orthodox came from Lithuania, Poland, and Belorussia during the last decade of the nineteenth century; however, it seems that the most important movement occurred in the ten years preceding the First World War.

The Old Orthodox men searched for work mainly in the western and southern counties of Pennsylvania, especially in Allegheny County. Often they came without their families, intending to earn a good sum of money and then return to their villages in the old country. Once they had found work, some of the unmarried men went home to find wives, and many of the new couples then returned to the States. Many others sent word for their families to join them once they had earned enough money to pay the passage.

The work they did was not easy: they unloaded lumber in Erie, and worked in the mines of Pennsylvania at Essen, Cokeburgh, and Marianna. In the steel mills, they often held the most arduous jobs.

Gradually, they began to take on part of the American life style. Some picked up English quickly, others did not. Women of marriageable age generally adopted American dress. One contemporary item of progress that soon appeared in their homes was the Kalamazoo stove. Almost all of them got good marks as honest workers, despite a certain love of drink.

Living conditions for these workers were worse than modest. Usually, they paid three dollars a month to rent a corner of one room from another Old Orthodox. The renter, or "hazda," besides providing some space in a room, washed clothes, supplied cabbage for soup, and cooked the meals. Building a bania, or Russian bath-house, was too much of an undertaking in the early years, so bath-houses did not appear until later.
By 1913 there was about 3,000 Old Orthodox in Pennsylvania, mainly in the towns of Erie, Essen, Cokeburgh, Marianna, and Russeltown. They belonged to the priestless (bezpopovtsy) groups of the Theodosians and Pomorians, and had only one prayer-house, which was in the town of Essen. Their preceptor (nastavnik) came from Prussia, and had even served in the Prussian Guards as a non-commissioned officer. Five years after its establishment, the prayer-house or church was moved to Marianna.1

Our primary source on the situation of the Old Orthodox in the United States before 1914, an engineer by the name of A. Sokoloff, says he found “the Old Believers the most kind-hearted, good-natured lot of people I had ever met. . . . Their industry came rather as a surprise to me. We Russians of advanced thought agree with the reactionaries on one thing, that the ‘muzhik’ is lazy. ‘If he would not be so lazy there would not be famine; a big stick is good enough for him,’ says the reactionary. ‘If he were not so lazy, he could throw all that pile of corruption into Hades,’ say we. . . . Whatever their manner of life is, the Old Believers are the most self-reliant group of Slavs in America. . . . The worst thing I know about them is that they are not strong union men, and they are accused of having broken up the longshoremen’s union in Erie. . . . These Old Believers live as though yet on passage. . . . If I noticed among my people any inclination to stay here, it was among these same Old Believers.”2

The first Old Orthodox parish in Erie was registered in 1916. The parish church, dedicated to the Nativity of Jesus Christ, was consecrated on August 28, 1919.3

The American Old Orthodox kept up their ties with their old country, whether it be Latvia, Lithuania or Poland. A Riga journal, for example, mentioned the Old Orthodox in the States.4

At present, there are four communities of Pomorians in the United States: the largest is in Erie, but there are also communities in Marianna, Pa., Detroit, Michigan, and Millville, N.J. The Theodosians

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1 A. Sokoloff, “Old Believers: Mediaeval Russia in the Pittsburgh District,” Survey 33, no. 7 (Nov. 7, 1914) 145–51; conversations with Pomorians in Erie, Pa. over the course of several years 1969–75. I would like to thank Mr. John Patrick for reading and criticizing the present paper.
2 Ibid., pp. 150–1.
seem to have joined the Pomorians, a process similar to that which occurred, and is occurring, among the priestless Old Orthodox in the Baltic States. The communities jointly hold conferences, and there are also conferences of Pomorian youth. Calendars and brochures are published. The church choir in Erie is very good, the voices young and clear. In the various parishes one finds ikons painted by Pimen Sofronov, the Pomorian ikon-painter who died in New Jersey in 1973.

In September 1975 in Marianna there was a conference of Pomorian priests (nastavniki) and laymen. Among other questions, they discussed the lifting of the 1666–67 anathemas by the Local Sobor of the Russian Orthodox Church at Zagorsk in 1971, and the lifting of the same by the Third Sobor of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad at New York in 1974. The “Resolution Passed by the Conference of Priests” contained the following: “1. To thank and praise the Lord God for enlightening the contemporary New Orthodox society. . . . 2. To express our gratitude to all partakers of the Russian Orthodox Local Council [Sobor], held in the U.S.S.R. in 1971, as well as, of the Council [Sobor] of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, held in 1974, . . . 3. To continue keeping our Old rituals, for they are an indispensable part of the true Christ’s Orthodox faith. . . . 4. To get in contact with our brethren in faith. . . . 5. To forget all harms and injustices, caused to Old Believers in the past. . . . 6. To send a letter of gratitude and our Christian ‘Save the Lord’ to the honorable writer A. I. Solzhenitsyn. . . .”

After the Revolution, some Old Orthodox having priests (popovtsy) appeared in the United States, including members of such prominent merchant families as the Morozovs and the Riabushinskiis. There are at present very few popovtsy in North America, but for a while there was a group with a priest in Canada.

In the 1960s other groups of Old Orthodox arrived in America.

7 Texts of the Sobor decisions can be found in Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii, 1971, no. 6, pp. 5–7 and Novoe Russkoe Slovo, 3 November 1974, p. 4.
8 “Resolution Passed by the Conference of the Priests, held in Marianna, Pa., in the Church of St. Nicholas, on September 14, 1975,” Old Orthodox Church Calendar 1976/Drevlepravoslavnuii Kalendar’ (Millville, N.J., 1975), pp. 35–6.
Among them were the Nekrasovtsy, named after their original Cossack leader, who, during the reign of Peter the First, had fled to Turkey from the Don. In this century several groups of the Nekrasovtsy have returned to Russia, even after the Revolution of 1917. A small group came to the United States in 1963 with the help of the Tolstoy Foundation. They first settled in the towns of Lakewood and Paterson, New Jersey. Later, a large part of the Nekrasovtsy, finding it hard to keep to their way of life, moved to the Willamette Valley in Oregon. Some of the Nekrasovtsy were assimilated rather quickly into American life, even to the extent that some of the men shaved off their beards. Regarding pressure from employers to conform to local customs, including shaving, one of them said, "They want everybody to look alike." The Nekrasovtsy, according to the employers, are good and conscientious workers.

Another group of Old Orthodox that has come to the United States since World War II, besides the various Old Orthodox among the Displaced Persons, is the chasovenniki. This group came from China via Hong Kong and Brazil and settled in Oregon and Alaska. In the 1920s and 1930s, they had fled from the USSR and settled in Manchuria, where they hunted, fished and gardened. However, by the 1950s and 1960s they were forced to leave China, the last group departing in 1966. They went first to Australia, Brazil, and Argentina, and some remain in all three countries. Those who went to Brazil found it hard to live as agriculturists and decided to move to Oregon. There, some found it difficult to lead their own way of life, and so they sent a scouting party to Alaska. Alaska's isolation appealed to them, and in 1968 they built the first homes of the new Old Orthodox settlement, called Nikolaevsk. Now, more than 200 chasovenniki live and work there and have their own prayer-house. They have established the Russian Marine Company, which produces fiberglass boats. They also engage in farming, fishing, and livestock raising. The young generation studies in American grammar schools, and has shown good mathematical abilities. Most of the chasovenniki, however, continue to live in Oregon.

Although they were the last group to arrive, the chasovenniki are already American citizens. On June 19, 1975, some 59 Old Orthodox

became naturalized citizens. The governor of Alaska and representatives of the Tolstoy Foundation attended the ceremony. The Tolstoy Foundation was also instrumental in bringing a large Old Orthodox family to Maryland.¹⁰

At present, about 8,000 Old Orthodox live in the United States. About 4,000 are in Oregon (mostly chasovenniki, with some Nekrasovtsy). Some 3,750 are in the states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, and in nearby areas of neighboring states. These latter include 3,500 Pomorians and the 250 Nekrasovtsy in New Jersey. Finally there are the 275 Old Orthodox in Alaska. Besides these, a few families belonging to the Old Orthodox with priests live in various American cities. There are also some Pomorians and popovtsy living in Canada.

Some Pomorians are already fourth-generation Americans: they include lawyers, engineers, and doctors. However there are also other Old Orthodox who have only recently arrived, and have not as yet entered the mainstream of American life.

The American Old Orthodox, whether recent arrivals or not, were not greatly cheered by the lifting of the anathemas by the various Sobors. They had expected that act as no more than a necessary confession on the part of the New Orthodox Church. However, the lifting of the anathemas seems to be a good start, one which should help the cause of mutual understanding between the Old Orthodox and New Orthodox Churches.