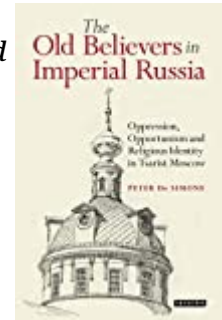


Peter T. De Simone. *The Old Believers in Imperial Russia: Oppression, Opportunism and Religious Identity in Tsarist Moscow.* Library of Modern Russia Series. London: I. B. Tauris, 2018. xvi + 263 pp. \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78453-892-7.



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From the mid-seventeenth century, a hotly contested and sometimes epic battle raged between adherents of the official Russian Orthodox Church and the *staroobriadtsy*, known in the historiography as either Old Believers or Old Ritualists. In his first monography, Peter T. De Simone explores how the Old Believers experienced and navigated this fight. More specifically, De Simone engages the tools of microhistory to examine the *popovtsy* (priested) community centered on Rogozhskoe Cemetery, located on Moscow's eastern outskirts, from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. As the author demonstrates, Rogozhskoe occupied an influential place not only among the empire's Old Believers but also among state and church officials who sought to contain and restrict what they considered to be a dangerous group of heretical schismatics. Broadly, De Simone attempts to carve out a more dynamic and integral role for Moscow's Old Believers in the Russian Empire's historiography. He insists that Rogozhskoe's Old Believers "could be a part of two different ideological and cultural worlds: their own

idealized world guided by the principles of their faith in the Old Rite, and the ever-changing world of contemporary Moscow." In this sense, De Simone inflects Old Believers' history with the liveliness and adaptability now common in scholarly representations of religious life of imperial Russia. Moreover, De Simone focuses on the three aspects of Rogozhskoe's history that form his book's subtitle: oppression, opportunism, and religious identity. Overall, he argues that Moscow's Old Believers sought to "present themselves as the true embodiment of Russian Orthodoxy and their idealized Russian cultural destiny" (p. 3).

Following an introductory section, the book begins with a chapter surveying Old Believers' socioeconomic and legal position in Russia from roughly 1700 to 1820 as well as the first decades of Rogozhskoe's existence. First, De Simone reviews much of the extant literature that has shown Old Believers' unique status in imperial Russia. Oppressed by a state that refused to legally recognize its clergy or churches, Russia's Old Believers nonetheless enjoyed tacit toleration because the

wealthiest and most industrious merchants among them contributed significantly to the economy. Meanwhile, the Russian Orthodox Church in conjunction with the state promoted the *edinoveriie* movement, which afforded Old Believers legal protections for their spiritual practices in return for submitting to the authority of the Holy Synod. Second, De Simone turns to Moscow's Old Believers, the majority of whom belonged to the *popovtsy* or priested branch of the faith. Seizing on the opportunities afforded by the chaotic plague of 1771, the leaders of this community successfully petitioned Catherine II's government for their own space by underscoring their commitment to quarantining and caring for the afflicted through charity. This area known as Rogozhskoe, though a cemetery in name, became an active center of religious life for the city's Old Believers. Most important, it provided a clearly designated space in which the community could perform and observe religious rites, especially baptisms and weddings otherwise only available through the official Orthodox Church. Quickly, Orthodox priests who ascribed to Old Ritualist practices flocked here to serve eager parishioners. De Simone also points out that after the devastating Napoleonic invasion of 1812, Rogozhskoe became "a model of charity in Moscow," offering assistance to "soldiers, the homeless, the impoverished, and all others" (p. 63). Based on these observations, De Simone commences his argument that Rogozhskoe's Old Believers appropriated the idea of "Holy Moscow," positioning themselves as "the sole defenders of true *Russian* culture and identity" (p. 37).

In the second chapter, De Simone recounts how the Rogozhskoe community's aspirations were undercut by metropolitan of Moscow Filaret (Drozdov) (1821-67) and Nicholas I's regime. Together, state and church forces enacted "invasive legislation that intended to restrict the lives and spiritual experience for Old Believers" (p. 78). This included shuttering the altars and preventing restoration or building activities at Rogozhskoe's chapels, closing its schools, inhibiting the com-

munity from accepting orphans or the elderly at its almshouses, and cracking down on Orthodox-cum-Old-Believer priests seeking shelter here. As part of its response to these crises, the Rogozhskoe community turned to the burgeoning Belokrinit-skaya Hierarchy, an Old Believer bishopric in western Ukraine, then under Habsburg rule. For the uninitiated, this part of the book may be confusing, especially considering that the hierarchy began with Ambrose Pappa-Georgopoli, the Greek-speaking metropolitan of Bosnia-Sarajevo who left his position under the patriarchate of Constantinople to join the Old Ritualists. In short, it seems that the trustees—the wealthy leaders at the head of the Rogozhskoe community—foresaw greater protections and legitimation under an independent metropolitanate that only the Belokrinit-skaya Hierarchy could provide.

The subsequent debates and eventual establishment of an Old Believer metropolitanate in Moscow along with the manifold changes unleashed by the Great Reforms (1861-74) constitute some of the most important themes in the book's third chapter. As readers might expect, great controversy among Old Believers and much apprehension from the state accompanied Rogozhskoe's acceptance of the Belokrinit-skaya Hierarchy. Ilarion Kabanov, the most prominent of the defenders of this move, known as *okruzhniki* or encyclicalists, justified it by suggesting that the Old Rite never broke communion with the Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches and downplaying the historical uniformity of long-established markers of Old Ritualist practice, such as using two rather than three fingers for crossing oneself and spelling Jesus "Isus" rather than "Iisus." Despite opposition from the *neorkuzhiki* or non-encyclicalists—who apparently left Rogozhskoe in large numbers—Archbishop Antonii (Shutov) took the throne as metropolitan in 1863. Unfortunately for Moscow's Old Believers, state and church persecution did not falter under either Alexander II or Alexander III. This was not from lack of trying. Rogozhskoe philanthropy increased, the community funded an 1876 photo-

graphy project to show civil administrators the desperate need to restore the chapels containing priceless medieval and ancient icons, and Rogozhskoe leaders even promised to sweat loyalty oaths to Alexander III in 1883. Orthodox opposition—above all procurator of the Holy Synod Konstantin Pobedonostsev (1880-1905)—ultimately remained too strong.

Nicholas II's decree of religious toleration in 1905 changed matters dramatically, however, as described in chapter 4. With most draconian measures finally lifted—only the Orthodox Church remained legally recognized—Rogozhskoe thrived as never before. In addition to reopening their chapels and altars, Rogozhskoe Old Believers replaced the trustees with the Moskovskaia Staroobriadcheskaia Obshchina Rogozhskogo Kladbisha (MSORK) in 1907, erected an eighty-meter belfry in 1908, sent a delegation to celebrate Easter with Tsar Nicholas II in 1910, established the Old Believer Theological Institute in 1912, continued expanding their philanthropic outreach, and published the newspapers *Narodnaia gazeta* and *Tserkov'*. Other problems lingered, however. What did it mean to be an Old Believer and what distinguished Old Believers from their Orthodox competitors? As the Belokrinitskaya affair demonstrated, divergent and sometimes ambiguous answers to these questions existed. Feodor Permiakov offered arguably the most thorough attempt to articulate the unifying practices and histories of Old Ritualists in his 1910 publication *Vypiski iz Sviashchennago in sviatootechneskago pisaniia, i tvorenii sviatykh ottsov i uchitelei tserkov: O vnesnii patriarch Nikon i ego priemnikami novizn i lozhnago ucheniia*. One further defining trait for Rogozhskoe in particular was its unparalleled collection of ancient icons, some of which was donated to Tretyakov Gallery, which drew numerous Old Believer and Orthodox visitors. Rogozhskoe's brief moment of flourishing came to an end in the 1920s when the new Bolshevik state seized the community's records and encroached on its territory, as the "Epilogue and Conclusion" section makes clear.

The author's intriguing arguments could be strengthened in several ways. First, Rogozhskoe's story should be more thoroughly integrated into the broader histories of Russia's eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. For instance, the struggle to identify a homogenous and Orthodox nature of Old Belief paralleled similar challenges in the Russian Orthodox Church, especially

after the Great Reforms when travel and the popular press increased believers' exposure to coreligionists' heterodox practices and beliefs. Readers would benefit from knowing more clearly how the Rogozhskoe community's experiences fit in these and related contexts. Second, important analytical categories, such as class, gender, and ethnicity/nationality, remain rather unexplored in this work. Clearly, the wealthy merchant families—the Riabushinskiis, Morozovs, and Rakhmanovs, to name a few—dominated Rogozhskoe, but as the 1885 and 1905 strikes at Old Believer factories demonstrated class was an important divider among the faithful. It is likewise striking that De Simone does not disaggregate imperial and ethnic forms of Russian identity (for example, *rossiskii* versus *ruskii*), leaving readers wondering whether the Rogozhskoe community envisioned itself as defending a transnational or determinedly East Slav “Russian culture and identity.” Third, readers learn little about an important function of the Rogozhskoe cemetery: burial and commemoration. Surely the fact that the most important and communal experiences of their faith occurred among the dead must have influenced Moscow's Old Believers. If it did not, readers would be interested to know why.

Scholars interested in Russia's Old Believers will find De Simone's book an interesting and useful addition to their collection. Audiences more broadly interested in the histories of the Russia Empire, Moscow and urban centers, and religious minorities will also find *Old Believers in Imperial Russia* worth reading.

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