

# Soviet Secularisation: the Experience of the Old Believers in Eastern Latvia

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Sovětská sekularizace: Zkušenosti starověrců ve východním Lotyšsku

**Abstract:** The article provides the first overview on Soviet secularisation and the response of priest-less Old Believers in Latvia. Unlike Russia, Latvian Old Believers had the experience of long-term living in democracy before they were incorporated in the Soviet system. This fact played a crucial role in the strategies of preserving religiosity under atheism. The studied oral life-stories demonstrate that the majority of Old Believers chose living a double life of a trustworthy Soviet citizen in public and a devoted follower of the faith in private. Overcoming restrictions in social career, education and personal realisation allowed passing the religious traditions to the further generations. At the same time, the lack of systematic religious practice and all-round social pressure contributed to the diminution of the role of religion in people's life and their worldview.

**Keywords:** Latvia; Old Believers; Religiosity; Soviet Secularisation; Propaganda of Atheism

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## The Schism and the Formation of the Pomorian Bespopovtsy in Latvia

The Patriarch Nikon managed to persuade the Tsar Alexis and the majority of the hierarchs that his liturgical novelties were just correction of the mistakes that appeared during the preceding centuries. In 1666–1667, the Russian Orthodox Church Council and later the Ecumenical Council accepted Nikon's reforms and excommunicated those, who did not want to change the traditional Old Russian ceremonial. To escape from the prosecutions, the dissenters started moving from the centre of the empire and its biggest cities to the territories that were less controlled by the state. The movement began already in the seventeenth century and intensified after the greatest leaders of the Old Belief – the Archpriest Avvakum and his associates – were executed in Pustozersk in 1682 [*Zenkovsky 2006: 357*].

After the Schism, Old Believers divided into two major groups – Popovtsy (priestly) and Bespopovtsy (priest-less). Popovtsy were those, who preserved the Church hierarchy by hosting Orthodox priests who remained committed to the pre-reform Orthodoxy. In their turn, Bespopovtsy decided to stay priest-less. They believed that after the Russian Orthodox Church reforms, the power of the Antichrist reigned and the Orthodox priests lost the divine blessing and the right to administer the Sacraments. Bespopovtsy elected *nastavniki* – spiritual leaders, who were responsible for the interpretation and explanation of the religious rites and the service. The western historiography may translate *nastavnik* as 'preceptor' or 'leader', and in some cases leave *nastavnik* [*Clay 2008; Robson 1993*]. In

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Latvian historiography of the Soviet period the term 'tutor' (*audzinātājs*) was used, but it does not reflect all the obligations of *nastavnik*. We usually use the term 'spiritual leader' that, in our opinion, demonstrates the role of *nastavnik* in the best way, because he combines the functions of a priest and the position of a parish's leader.

Latvian Old Believers most likely trace their roots from the Novgorod region, where Feodosiy Vasilyev developed his radical conception of Bespopovtsy Fedoseyevtsy denomination. They rejected matrimonies and because of that were considered fornicators and persecuted by the power [Zenkovsky 2006: 357–358]. At the time, a major part of the present Latvia was included in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Sweden and the Duchy of Courland and suffered from the wars and plague epidemic. In these circumstances, the local landlords were very interested in the inflow of labour. The king of Poland John III Sobieski (1674–1696) with a special edict allowed Old Believers to settle down on his territories. In 1659, the first Old Believers' worship house appeared in Liginishki village, now a part of Daugavpils city [Podmazov 2010: 9]. Since that, Old Believers settled on the territory of the south-eastern Latvia.

At present, the researchers have not come to a consensus on the question of the appearance of Old Believers in Riga. Zavarina argues that they may trace their origins since the thirteenth century from the *Russische Dorf* – a settlement of Russian merchants with their own church and cemetery. These people confessed the pre-reformed Orthodoxy and it is possible to assume, that the persecuted dissenters found support in Riga and established their parishes [Zavarina 2011: 6]. Podmazov is not so sure because there are no fixed historical evidences about the first Old Believers in Riga, but according to the population census, a considerable number of them lived in the city already in the first decades of the eighteenth century [Podmazov 2010: 10]. Whatever it was, nowadays the Grebenshchikov's parish in Riga is the largest Pomorian Old Believers' parish in the Baltics.

The present Pomorian Old Belief includes all the pre-reform dogmas and rites of the Russian Orthodox Church that was possible to keep without the presence of the priesthood. The base of the doctrine is the Holy Writ and the Holy Tradition (*Sviashchennoe Predanie*) that consists of the writings of the Holy apostles, the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils and the theological writings of the Church Fathers. In their religious practice Pomorians rely on the canonical issues from the Nomocanon, the resolutions of the Russian Orthodox Church councils before the reforms of the seventeenth century, and the resolutions of the all-Russian councils of Pomorians of 1909 and 1912.

Nowadays Latvia is a religiously diverse country, including more than 20 different religious groups, where Old Believers, also called Old Orthodox, take the fifth place by the number of the registered congregations (62) [Central Statistical Bureau 2018]. According to the data, provided by Old Believers themselves, there are more than 70,000 followers [Press release of OOPC 2010]. Secularisation is one of the central problems for the Old Believers in contemporary Latvia. A decreasing number of parishioners, overwhelming number of senior people and lack of middle-aged followers and children, as well as migration from countryside to cities and abroad, are the factors for pessimistic prognosis for the development of the Old Belief. The choice in favour of worldly values and the abandonment of the religious traditions, was particularly intensified under the Soviet regime. The authors, who study the history of the Old Belief on the materials of Russia, usually consider that

Old Believers were free from the state persecution from 1905 to 1917 and then had to deal with restrictions again after the establishment of the Soviet Russia [Crummey 2011]. In case of the Baltic States, and in particularly in Latvia, local Old Believers have experienced a much longer period of freedom of faith. Moreover, they have developed the principles of self-identity within multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. After the first Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940 Russian Old Believers of Latvia clearly differentiated themselves from 'the Soviets' and felt united with the representatives of local ethnic groups because of belonging to the Latvian state [Saleniece 2007].

### Latvian Old Believers in the 1920–1930s

After the fall of the Russian Empire and formation of the independent Republic of Latvia in 1918, Old Believers experienced freedom of faith and political, economic and cultural prosperity. Numerously, according to the population census data, in 1930s Latvian Old Believers made about 5,5 per cent (107,195) from all inhabitants (1,950,502) [*Population of Latvia by Religious Affiliation 1935*]. Being a small community, Old Believers enjoyed the same rights as large traditional confessions of Latvia.

In 1920, with acceptance of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Latvia, the First Congress of Latvian Old Believers decided to create a self-government body – the Central Committee for the Affairs of Old Believers in Latvia (further – the Central Committee). At the same time, the rules on regulation of the activities of Old Believers' parishes were adopted. All Old Believers' parishes registered their legal status in the Central Committee. By becoming the mediator between the state and the Old Believers' community, the Central Committee had to deal with organizational and economic matters, too. In that way, Latvian Old Believers used general legislation of the country to establish their own, in some way independent internal self-government.

In March 1922 the Committee of Spiritual Affairs was established. This institution was the first central administrative body of religious issues of the Old Belief. Priest-less Latvian Old Believers were dependent on their own spiritual leaders – *nastavniki*, who could develop their own particularities of religious practice in each parish, so as time passed, there were generated major differences in the interpretation of the Holy gospel, worshiping, rites and religious holidays. The newly established Committee of Spiritual Affairs began a long-term work of bringing order to Old Believers' religious life [*Podmazov 2005*].

The state coup of 1934 lead by Kārlis Ulmanis interrupted the democratic development of Latvia and established authoritarian regime. All public institutions stopped their activities and were disorganized. Latvian Old Believers lost their self-government bodies, too. Nevertheless, after several discussions on 14 February 1935 'The Law on Old Believers' parishes' was passed. The law provided Old Believers with the rights to propagate their religious doctrine 'freely and openly', as well as to keep traditions of their faith and religious service, establish parishes and register them at the Department of Religious Affairs [*Valdības Vēstnesis 19.02.1935*].

Thus, both democratic and authoritarian regimes in Latvia during 1920–1930s were very positive for the Old Believers and encouraged their multilateral development as loyal citizens and religious community. The Old Believers were Latvians by nationality, Russians by ethnicity and Old Orthodox by religious origins. This experience played a crucial role

in keeping the Old Believers' religiosity during the Soviet regime and influenced their strategies of adapting to secularisation policy of the USSR.

### **Soviet Secularisation in Latvia and the Religious Policy of the USSR**

According to Zuckerman and Shook, the understanding of secularism as a term with multiform history and multipurpose potential, depends on the social environment [Zuckerman and Shook 2017: 1–20]. Traditionally, there are two main types of secularisation: European (classic) and American. Since 1970s, the sociologists discuss one more type of secularisation, which was inherent to communistic societies – the so-called 'Soviet secularisation' [Martin 1978; Berger 2008; Uzlaner 2010]. The Soviet secularisation is the worst studied from the factual and theoretical side, and the more local findings, dedicated to individual cases of the Soviet Republics, we have, the better general trends will be discovered. The main characteristic of the Soviet secularisation is that it was implemented through oppression of religion and religiosity. This oppression was realised by destructing and reducing of religious institutions, criminal prosecution and psychological pressure on believers. In parallel, religion was forced out of the culture and education by re-interpreting its role in history along with the critics of religious philosophy and theological traditions. Religiosity became the private choice of a person. Thus, hyper-privatization of religion is one of the most important characteristics of the Soviet secularisation [Shishkov 2012: 167]. The main vector of the secularisation during the Soviet period was directed at displacing of religion not only from the public, but from the private sphere, too. As a result, religion became a part of a secret private life. In a broad context, secularisation developed a mindset that transformed society by indoctrinating nonreligious vision of life and morality [Kiope *et al.* 2020: 138]. Religious people, in their turn, had to live double life: they demonstrated their belonging to Soviet citizens in public and hide their religiosity, because of the fear of being punished. That is why we can talk about hyper-privatization of religion. This is one of the main differences between the Soviet and the European secularisation, which allowed private forms of religiosity without any restrictions [Shishkov 2012: 168].

In case of sovietisation of the Baltic Republics, the prime goal was 'embedding' the region into the Soviet system by transforming political, social and economic structures in accordance with the Soviet model. Although this policy was carried out under the slogans of restoring the economy, founding of Kolkhozes and political stabilization, it was actually about breaking down the previously established political and economic structures in the region, as well as the habitual way of life and traditions of the population [Patenko 2006: 67–68].

At present, there are no any summarizing qualitative studies about the experience of religious groups in Latvia during the Soviet period, but just some fragmental studies. Atheism as a part of the Soviet ideology was widespread in all territories; however, their regional specifics does not allow us extrapolating one's experience to all. In relation to this issue, Latvia demonstrates both regional and confessional peculiarities [Kalme 2017]. Let me remind that the process of secularisation on the territory of Russia began already in the 1920s. Old Believers together with others experienced repressions, deportations and imprisonment. They were one of the most economically developed groups, who protected the imperial regime against the Bolsheviks and that was the reason they were in the focus

of Soviet authorities in Russia [Dzuban *at al.* 2017: 184, 186]. In Latvia, the mass deportations of the people, including Russian Old Believers, took place in 1940s after they were incriminated as ‘people’s enemies’ [Saleniece 2008]. Throughout the territory of the USSR Old Believers’ parishes lost their properties and the parishioners had to join Kolkhozes or sent to prison [Dzuban *at al.* 2017: 187]. In Russia at the beginning of the 1930s, the conception of ‘militant atheism’ was accepted. Religion was treated as the anti-Soviet concept that had to be suppressed [Gaġarin 1967].

In Latvia, the process of forced secularisation began with *declericalization*, which meant getting rid of inconvenient priests [Kiope *at al.* 2020: 143–144]. The KGB professionals arrested the clergymen as well as published special newspaper articles with shameful content [Krūmiņa-Koņkova 2015: 149–150]. The Roman Catholic Church as an institution with sustainable traditions and a foreign management body was specially persecuted by the Soviet authorities. In 1951, the theological seminary in Riga was closed, because the students could be used as agents of Vatican [Koroleva *at al.* 2014]. The Russian Orthodox Church because of its open support of the state was not punished so much, but experienced restrictions, too. From 1949 to 1954, the number of the churches and parishioners decreased every year. The priests were motivated to leave, the services were prohibited and the churches were closed [Koroleva *at al.* 2014].

Starting with 1954 the indoctrination of atheistic views still was supported with repressions, but the main accent was put to propaganda by using education. Eastern Latvia – Latgale – remained very religious in comparison to other parts of Latvia, and this caused intensifying dissemination of atheism. The Pedagogical Institute of Daugavpils as the only higher educational body in the region became the platform for atheist propaganda [Kiope *at al.* 2020: 144]. Some years later, in 1966, the Department of Philosophy at the State University of Latvia was opened with the aim to prepare ‘*ideologically iron-shod personnel*’ to defeat Latvian nationalism and Christian religiosity of the people [Kiope *at al.* 2020: 146]. Thus, the intelligentsia was initially subjected to indoctrination of atheistic worldview. Another direction in the fight against religiosity was replacing of traditional religious rites with secular rites. This process flourished in times of N. Khrushchev (1958–1964) and touched the representatives of all religious groups. The discussions on the harm of religious rites were included in the program of every atheist propagandist and the search for the new folk, but socialistic fests began [Zhidkova 2012: 413–414]. The process of involving secular rites was very active in the Baltic states, too [Kiope *at al.* 2020: 147].

Nowadays the question on the Old Believers’ evolution during the Soviet period is not conceptualised by the researchers yet and desires historical and philosophical argumentation [Dzuban *at al.* 2017: 182]. After the Soviet government was established, Latvian Old Believers lost self-governing bodies and along with other religious groups had to adapt to new conditions. The only governing institution of Pomorian Old Believers in the USSR was the Highest Council of the Old Believers in Lithuania (further – the Council). It continued existing since the pre-war times and during the Soviet period was very active in its attempts to unite all Pomorian Old Believers. The Council registered Old Believers’ parishes, formally approved new spiritual leaders, sent recommendations to the parishes, as well as examined discords on religious issues with the help of the Spiritual Court [Podmazov 2001: 143–144]. In collaboration with Lithuanian and Moscow Old Believers the Greneshchikov’s Old Believers’ parish in Riga published church calendars with religious

and historical information on Old Belief [*Podmazov 2001: 144–145*]. The Calendar became one of the unifying tools of Pomorian Old Believers and helped to save the spirit of one community under the anti-religious policy of the USSR.

## Methods and Sources

Oral history sources – memories of the witnesses is the only true way to find out about the experience of the Old Believers in Latvia in their everyday religious practice during the Soviet time. Their feelings and thoughts, reasons of their choices and strategies of adaptation to atheistic atmosphere are demonstrated in the interviews for the collection of the Oral History Centre of Daugavpils University (further – OHC). The OHC was founded in 2003 under the History Department of Daugavpils University. The collection includes more than 1100 audio records and their transcriptions (partly), copies of photos and documents. The main approach to the interviewing is a life-story – a person's biography, told by her/himself with the help of an interviewer. This method allows discovering respondent's personality, life experience and historical context. The main criteria for the respondents to interview is their age (50+) and their agreement to talk. This provides the collection with the interviews, which authors represent different kind of ethnic, religious, social and other background.

The catalogue of the OHC allows grouping the respondents by categories. For the research we chose those respondents, who identified themselves as Old Believers – 134 audio-records, including 68 interviews with transcriptions. The transcriptions were studied and the information (citations) about the religious experience was selected. The citations were grouped into two major subgroups: experience about 1) keeping and 2) abandoning religiosity during the Soviet period. The studied respondents were born between 1918 and 1948 and were (non)practicing the Old Belief in eastern Latvia during the Soviet period (1945–1991). These interviewees and their parents had experienced freedom of faith during the 1920–1930s in the Republic of Latvia. After the Soviet regime was established, the people had to make a conscious choice to stay religious or abandon. The problem of religiosity under the atheistic regime is to be considered from different points of view: everyday practice, religious holidays, resisting educational and professional challenges, as well as person's psychological comfort. Further, some typical examples and comments of how people adapted to the Soviet secularisation.

## Practices of the Old Believers' Religiosity

The article 124 of the Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the USSR stated: 'In order to ensure freedom of conscience to citizens, the church in the USSR is separated from the state, and the school – from the church. Freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda is recognized for all citizens' [*Stalin 1936*]. Based on the law, everybody was allowed to practice her/his religion, but in practice clergy and religious people suffered from persecutions, public humiliations and threats to public careers and job loss. One of the youngest respondents, a male born in 1943, remembered the specificity of his home religious education after the Second World War and further religious practice. It was his family's decision to transfer religious traditions and to teach the religious practice in the circumstances of anti-religiosity:

*Religion was alienated from the state, those who wanted to believe in God were despised (...) there was a complete denial of religion, and we were brought up on this, that there is no religion, no God, no servants of cult. Still (...) parents said there was God and in secret, in secret from everybody, they led us to prayer house, church etc. and all those holidays as Christmas and Easter were celebrated. (...) We did not experience any political persecution. Nevertheless, there were problems with teachers who claimed there was no God. (...) But in general, I still have this training. [DU OHC: 20, translated from Russian]*

'This training' – *zakalka*<sup>1</sup> – is one of the key terms to understand Latvian Old Believers' core of religiosity. *Zakalka* means the ability to withstand external adverse conditions. This ability was trained from the very origins of the Old Belief during the illegal existence in the Russian Empire, and then strengthened during the first independent Republic of Latvia in 1920–1930s. *Zakalka* became especially important for religious people under the pressure of atheistic propaganda that was strengthened by school teachers. Educating process became a significant part of indoctrination, the authority of pedagogues was put to the highest positions and believers were being influenced from the very childhood [Ewing 2011: 16–17].

A female, born in 1939, described the beginnings of anti-religious campaigns at school and integration of atheism through pioneer code of ethics: *The Soviet power came and the pioneers. [My parents] did not want to allow me going there [becoming a pioneer]. Then little by little, there appeared one, two, three [pioneers] in the class, they were wearing those horrible ties. Then everything became usual. Agitations began (...) all this anti-religion, little by little (...) I remember once on Easter there came our history teacher (...) and started to write down those, who were in the prayer house. On the next day at school, all of had to explain why we attended the prayer house and after that – disgust [DU OHC: 730, translated from Russian].*

The members of the Vladimir Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization could never dream about staying religious. Moreover, the 'Young Pioneer Leader's Handbook' required every pioneer to set up an atheist's corner at home with anti-religious pictures, poems and quotations in contrast to the traditional *red* corners with icons, religious items and books [Spring 2012]. The practice of supervising those, who attended religious services, was widespread all over the USSR, and teachers were the ones to make lists of pupils and then censure them in public [Saleniece 2017]. This approach inspired others to follow the example of a teacher and to take an active part in ridiculing any manifestation of religiosity. One of the most vivid attributes of religious people was a cross pendant.

Wearing of a cross pendant – *natelnyy krest* – is a very significant part of the Old Believers' everyday religious practice. They could not leave it at home, and this sign of their religiosity eventually was visible to their circle of acquaintances, especially if they were classmates, who usually notified teachers about such a 'disgrace'. A female, born in 1927, mentioned a conflict case happened to her daughter at school. *I will tell you what, I had five children, yes, and my daughter went to school. (...) They had sport lesson there, and when they changed their clothes, classmates saw the cross pendant [on my daughter] and started laughing (...) My daughter came home crying. (...) The teacher met me (...) and asked: 'Why are you destroying the child's soul? (...) Children are laughing at her, but she has that rope on*

<sup>1</sup> Literally 'zakalka' means hardening, quenching, tempering.

*her neck and that cross. Take that off! And I said: [teachers' name], if you have something to say about the lessons, tell me, but in other way, it's our, parents' business.' Since that, nobody had told her [daughter] a word [DU OHC: 759, translated from Russian].*

Classmates mocked the girl because of wearing the cross pendant, and their teacher decided to save the 'child's soul' by advising her mother to take the cross off, but it was unacceptable for this family. Therefore, the mother ventured to disregard the authority of the teacher and was successful in protecting her girl's rights on staying religious. The pressure from others was strong enough to make the girl suffer, but the support of the mother helped her keep religious traditions and resist secularisation.

School teachers were one of the most efficient tools for introducing atheistic ideology. Nevertheless, there was one category of teachers, who were on the opposite side. These were Old Believers' teachers of religion<sup>2</sup>. During the 1920–1930s, teachers of religion were officially certified and worked in state schools as well as in parishes' Sunday schools [Pazuhina 2018]. They were very respectful and influential among parishioners. For this reason, after the Soviet power was established, teachers of religion were strictly controlled and sometimes their families experienced great difficulties in everyday life. A female, born in 1930, remembered harsh times because of being a daughter of a teacher of religion. *My father was a teacher of religion [in the 1920–1930s]. (...) It was very hard. (...) While Stalin was alive, the oppression was coming from all sides. People did not know how to live. The persecution of religion was terrible. It was forbidden to go to church. They chased, came, checked. (...) Everybody, who celebrated religious holidays in public, were criticized. (...) All this [religious practice] was forbidden. (...) Nobody could say that there was God. (...) Because of such religious propaganda, a person could suffer [DU OHC: 239, translated from Russian].*

The respondent who was educated in a religious family perceived the surrounding Soviet reality as very hostile towards any expression of religiosity even it was not obvious to the public. Her family went under humiliating checks and keeping religiosity became a challenge to her.

Due to aggressive control over people's religiosity and atmosphere of fear, voluntarily secularisation ensured safer and easier existence, especially for those who were dependant on social opinion and held positions in public services. Some of the Old Believers chose fictitious atheism that seemed as abandoning religion and, at the same time, they practiced the belief in secret. A female, born in 1929, emphasized that she had always been religious in spite of the fact, that she was forced to halt practicing religious rites because of the necessity to support her family.

*Are you religious?*

*I am. I have always been. (...) When Russians came [the Soviet regime was established], I did not go to a prayer house because I was working in a hospital.*

*Were there any critics?*

*I personally did not have. I tried [to hide], but in 1948 I christened my nephew. However, I was acting in such a way so that nobody detected me. If I were detected, of course, I would have had problems. That is why I abandoned [religious life]. [DU OHC: 784, translated from Russian]*

<sup>2</sup> In the original version: teacher of Zakon Bozhii [teacher of the God's Law] or verouchitel' [teacher of faith].



The environment of the total control and fear for safety forced people to pay more attention to their worldly life, thus religiosity became the forbidden fruit. Any manifestation of religiosity could cause irreversible consequences, and authorities used this condition to superintend and intimidate the subordinated workers. Even one-time participation in a public religious service could cause a reprimand or even dismissal. The worst part was that members of your own parish were ready to inform the authorities. A female, born in 1932, described a case when she was at risk after taking part in Confession service.

*Well, I tell you, during the Soviet times, I did not go to a prayer house. It was forbidden, because those, who worked, were Komsomolets<sup>3</sup>. (...) One day we went to Confession. (...) And the mother of our chef was there, too, so she told our chef about us. And he promised to kick out of work, but (...) finally it occurred he did not complain anywhere, just scared us. Since that I have never been to Confession. (...) I had to work. If they would fire me, how could I find a job? (...) Religion was prohibited; nobody went [to a religious service]. (...) I started to go [to a prayer house] in 1981 (...) after I left Komsomol [DU OHC: 457, translated from Russian].*

For many Old Believers the period of the Soviet power occurred to be an ordeal of their power of faith. The fear of losing a job made religious practice a risky adventure, and people were likely to abandon religiosity or practice it secretly in order to live in peace and harmony. However, there were those who did not experience any difficulties with practising religious rites. Their interviews are full of pride in being able to resist the system that was hostile towards religion and to keep religious traditions. Some of the respondents did not even notice the difference between the two periods – the democratic Latvia and the totalitarian Soviet Union. A female, born in 1923, grew up in very tolerant conditions and obtained religious education. To her mind, nobody, including Soviet authorities, could hinder her from practising religion. The only restriction mentioned by her was the impossibility to celebrate religious holidays in the way it had been done before.

*Was it allowed to go to church [during the 1920–1930s]?*

*It was, yes! It was obligatory to everybody. Before school, we, pupils, were led to a prayer house, everybody went there, prayed. (...)*

*Then the attitude to Christianity changed during the Soviet times. It was forbidden to go to church, there was atheism.*

*Hey, we were not forbidden! We went and continued to go to prayer house. Who had forbidden? Well, we did not celebrate in the way we did before. Nobody forbade. We went and prayed. [DU OHC: 681, translated from Russian]*

Ironically the opinion of the respondent matches with the statement in the Soviet Constitution: religion was not forbidden, people were just persuaded to abandon it. Nonetheless, for those Old Believers who did not occupy key social positions, practicing religion openly on the territory of Latvia was relatively safe [Vīksne 2017]. Moreover, according to the data on the number of parishes from 1964 to 1984, only seven prayer houses were ceased, whereas the other 67 continued working [Podmazov 2001: 149]. For example, in

<sup>3</sup> Komsomolets – members of Komsomol – the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League.

Daugavpils – the biggest city of eastern Latvia – there were six Old Believers' prayer houses. During the Soviet regime, all of them were active. Some of the parish leaders even managed to collaborate with local public authorities and received support in renovating the prayer houses. [DU OHC: 686] In fact, Old Believers did have the opportunity to practise their religion, and it was the combination of external circumstances and personal choice that led to one's secularisation or protection of the faith. A female, born in 1938, noticed that the only reason for not attending religious service was a large amount of work but the imposed non-religious atmosphere could not discourage her family from keeping religious traditions.

*We often went to a prayer house, but in summer, when there was a lot of work, we could not go. There were plenty of things to do, so I did not go. Nevertheless, my children and grandchildren – all were christened. No communists or somebody else can trouble my faith, and it will be as I want to be!* [DU OHC: 1039, translated from Russian]

This respondent felt no threat of secularisation because the family could perform one of the most important rites for any Christian person – baptising, that ensured continuity of religious traditions and preserving the fundamentals of the Old Belief. Another respondent, a male born in 1932, also claimed that nothing could make him abandon religiosity.

*Well, there were communists who prohibited praying to God. (...) I can tell you, I wanted to pray, I believed in God, and during that time, I prayed, too, in secret, but prayed* [DU OHC: 341, translated from Russian].

'Praying in secret' is a centuries-old practice that was widespread among the Old Believers since their origins and until the time they were legalized at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this sense, experience of underground religiosity gave them some advantage over the representatives of other religious groups. Every Old Believers' family had their own set of icons and religious books to organize religious ceremonies at home without going to a prayer house and being at risk of exposing as religious people. It was always about person's own choice how to treat the faith or abandon it, to make religiosity hyper-private or stay an open believer and provide transferring of the traditions to the next generations.

## Conclusions

Russian Old Believers of Latvia are a part of Russian minority and at the same time are closely connected to Latvian nation. It is not correct to compare their experience of preserving religiosity to other communities in Russia because of different previous history. Latvian Old Believers continued practicing religious rites in spite of the pressure of the regime that demanded atheism and even conscious ridicule of God. Keeping religious traditions for the majority of the Old Believers became a big challenge. Some of them ventured on secret religious practice, but there were also those, who were brave enough to be open believers and nowadays it makes them very proud. According to the studied interviews it is possible to detect the following typology of the Old Believers' religious experience in Latvia during the Soviet period: 1) abandoning religion and complete secularisation; 2) keeping religious traditions in secret and partial secularisation; 3) practicing

open religiosity and having restrictions in social career. In majority, Latvian Old Believers managed to save their religious practice that nowadays is being restored.

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#### List of sources:

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- Life story of D. Z., female, born in 1932, recorded by I. Bogdanoviča on 29 June 2007 in Subate, Latvia (90 minutes, Russian), transcribed by J. Vorotinska, DU OHC: 457.
- Life story of L. S., female, born in 1923, recorded by J. Jakovļeva on 10 December 2009 in Daugavpils, Latvia (43 minutes, Russian), transcribed by J. Jakovļeva, DU OHC: 681.
- Life story of A.Z., male, born in 1945, recorded by D. Stalidzāne on 16 April 2010 in Daugavpils, Latvia (41 minutes, Russian), transcribed by M. Grizāne, DU OHC: 686.
- Life story of J.C., female, born in 1939, recorded by R. Vilmane on 6 July 2010 in Preiļi, Latvia (93 minutes, Russian), transcribed by Al. Cvetkovs, DU OHC: 730.
- Life story of A. D., female, born in 1927, recorded by D. Stalidzāne on 7 July 2010 in Preiļi, Latvia (106 minutes, Russian), transcribed by Ļ. Miļukina, DU OHC: 759.
- Life story of I. K., male, born in 1927, recorded by D. Stalidzāne on 8 July 2010 in Preiļi, Latvia (145 minutes, Russian), transcribed by D. Stalidzāne, DU OHC: 782.
- Life story of J. K., female, born in 1929, recorded by A. Hudobčenoka on 8 July 2010 in Preiļi, Latvia (104 minutes, Russian), transcribed by D. Stalidzāne, DU OHC: 784.
- Life story of J. R., female, born in 1938, recorded by Z. Andrejevs on 6 July 2013 in Jēkabpils, Latvia (177 minutes, Russian), transcribed by R. Sisojevs, DU OHC: 1039.

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