

# The Identity and Demographic Situation of Russian Old Believers in Estonia. (With Regard to the Period of the 18<sup>th</sup> to the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century)<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Russian Old Believers, who came to Estonia starting from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century settled mainly on the western coast of Lake Peipsi (Peipus, in Russian: *Prichudie*). Today Lake Peipsi Old Believers reside mostly in four centres: 1) the town of Mustvee and Raja village bordering on it; 2) the town of Kallaste; 3) Kolkja-Kasepää-Varnja street villages; 4) and villages on Piirissaare Island. In the course of centuries Estonians, Russian Orthodox and Russian non-believers have also come to live in these centres. Until now, many Old Believers differentiate between “our own” and “alien” or “we” and “them” not so much by nationality but by faith. So not only (Lutheran) Estonians, with whom Old Believers have generally got along well, but also Orthodox Russians and Russian non-believers, who settled here mainly during the Soviet period (so-called *Sovetskiye*<sup>2</sup>) are regarded as aliens. Religion has served as a basis for Lake Peipsi Old Believers’ identity for centuries, for a long time overshadowing the ethnic and linguistic identities. The culture of Lake Peipsi Old Believers, most singularly in Estonian conditions, has been preserved as very original until today. This article is devoted to the issues of identity of Old Believers

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, Tatyana Maximova wrote about her interviews in Mustvee in 1999: “The Russians, who came in the Soviet times, are perceived by the local population as distinct from the local Russians who have been living here for a while. There is clear distinction between the local Russians and Soviet Russians. One respondent, a Russian, said that “Sovetskiye” are very different from “Russkiye”” (2001: 38).

in Estonia, above all, the religious identity, and the changes that have occurred during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the basis of mainly religious identity, the article also aims to give a survey of the demographic situation of Estonian Old Believers during the past few centuries. The period covered here extends mainly from the 18<sup>th</sup> century until today, regarding which different authors, due to lack of more detailed data, have presented very different estimates concerning the number of Old Believers on the coast of Lake Peipsi and all over Estonia (besides Lake Peipsi area Old Believers also reside in Tartu, Tallinn and elsewhere). It is especially complicated to estimate the number of Old Believers during the Soviet period, when identifying one with a religion could have resulted in persecution by the atheist authorities. The same kind of uncertainty about the number of people classified as Old Believers by their religious identity also reigned in the 1990s, when the estimates given by different authors varied from 2,000 to 10,000. In an article published in 1999, Juha Pentikäinen and Taisto Raudalainen, researchers of Old Believers, wrote about Estonia: "There is no current information available on either the numerical strength of the contemporary Old Believers in the area, or their affiliation with various branches of the Old Faith." This article is an attempt to fill in this gap. The author has made use of the materials of the Archive of the Estonian Commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults of the Soviet Union (ACARC)<sup>3</sup>; the data provided by the Department of Religious Affairs at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which keeps count of the denominations registered in Estonia since the 1990s; and the census conducted in Estonia in 2000. From the articles, monographs and source publications treating Old Believers in Estonia, the author has mostly used surveys of the history of

<sup>3</sup> Part of this archive is in the Estonian State Archives and its branch (ERA, Eesti Riigiarhiiv; ERAF, Eesti Riigiarhiivi Filiaal) and part of the documents is preserved in the archive of the Department of Religious Affairs at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Estonia. In this article, the author has used the following collections of the latter: "Otshety i spravki o sostoianii i deiatelnosti tserkvei v Estonskoi SSR" (OS, *Отчеты и справки о состоянии и деятельности церквей в Эстонской ССР*); "Perepiska s raznymi sovetскими organami i obshchestvennymi organizatsiami po voprosam religii" (PSO, *Переписка с разными советскими органами и общественными организациями по вопросам религий*). Abbreviations for these archive documents are: f. = *fond* (collection), n. = *nimistu* (register), s. = *säilik* (storage item), d. = *delo* (file), l. = *leht, list* (leaf, page).

Old Believers by Galina Ponomarjova (1999)<sup>4</sup>, Juha Pentikäinen and Taisto Raudalainen (1999), and Eiki Berg and Hill Kulu (1996).

In addition to that, this article aims to consider the main changes that occurred in the relations between Old Believers and authorities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which had a direct influence on the demographic situation of Old Believers and the development of their congregations under different rules. A brief survey is also given of Lake Peipsi Old Believers' attitude towards Russians and Estonians of a different faith and vice versa.

### **Russian Old Believers in Estonia until 1918**

The western coast of Lake Peipsi (*Chudskoye*) was settled in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the population was mostly Estonian, but there were also Russian fishermen, who constituted about 20% of the north western coastline population. The first Russian Old Believers appeared on the coast of Lake Peipsi near Mustvee in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, when trying to escape from the persecution of authorities and the Russian Orthodox Church. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the growing resettlement of Old Believers from different provinces of Russia and Poland. In Estonia, two branches of Priestless Old Believers found shelter. Later on the so-called *Fedoseievtsy* (*Rabskie*) formed two congregations (Raja, Väike-Kolkja), but the majority of Old Believers are *Pomortsy*. The enemies of Old Believers called them *Raskolniki*, whereas Old Believers called themselves *Starovery* (Moora 1964: 52 ff.; Berg, Kulu 1996: 1166–1169; Pentikäinen, Raudalainen 1999: 87–89; Ponomarjova 1999: 32).

The number of Old Believers increased in the fishing villages of Lake Peipsi especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the archival sources, studied by Yelizaveta Richter, the population of Russian settlements on the coast of Lake Peipsi increased as follows: in 1782 – 811, in 1811 – 1,172, in 1820–2,700 and in 1846 – 4,600 persons. Old Believers constituted the majority of them (Richter 1976: 21; see also: Moora 1964: 94–97; Kurs 1996: 28; *Ocherki...* 2004: 105).

From the year 1855 onwards, we have an exact number of Old Believers. According to a thorough list allegedly comprising all the Old Believers residing on the western coast of Lake Peipsi (including children), in 1855 the population of Old Believers comprised 3,278 persons (see:

<sup>4</sup> Ponomarjova's article "Russian Old Believers in Estonia" was published on the home page of Estonian Old Believers, too (see: [www.starover.ee/history.html](http://www.starover.ee/history.html)).

*Ocherki...* 2004: 25 ff.). In 1857, in the whole of the Livonian guberniya, the authorities estimated the number of Old Believers to be 12,680 (3,880 of them in Tartu County and 8,005 in the town of Riga) and in 1867 – 12,990 (3,159 in Tartu County and 8,798 in Riga) (*Ocherki...* 2004: 122). In the light of these figures, it is obviously an overestimate that in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the number of Old Believers on the coast of Lake Peipsi could have amounted to 5,000–6,000 (Pentikäinen, Raudalainen 1999: 86). Yet, besides the Livonian guberniya, Old Believers also lived in Tallinn and elsewhere in the Estonian guberniya.

According to the census of 1897, there might have been approximately 6,700 Old Believers (*Raskolniki*) on the then Estonian territory, constituting 0.7% of the total population of Estonia.<sup>5</sup>

The number of Old Believers increased despite persecution by authorities, which also took place in Estonia. Repression of Estonian Old Believers was especially severe during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (1825–1855). If the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the latter half of it, was the time for erecting worshipping places for Old Believers in the villages on the coast of Lake Peipsi,<sup>6</sup> then the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the time of closing them down. During the years 1840–1860, the only building for worship, operating in Estonia, was the one in Kasepää village (Pentikäinen, Raudalainen 1999: 90–91). Galina Ponomarjova described the persecution of Old Believers as follows:

“In the 19th century, the authorities tried to strengthen the position of the Orthodoxy in Prichudie in every possible way. A new Orthodox Church was built in Nos (Nina) village inhabited by members of the Orthodoxy. In the 1830s, its priest A. Orlov repeatedly wrote reports against Old Believers. Criminal proceedings were often instituted on the grounds of these reports. The following accusations were brought against

<sup>5</sup> Protestants (mostly Lutherans) made up 84.2%, Orthodox – 14.3%, Jews – 0.5% and Roman Catholics – 0.4% of the total population. The Russians who lived on the Estonian territory (4% of the total population in 1897) were mostly Orthodox, yet, the majority of the Orthodoxy was constituted already by Estonians. This was due to the Estonians' movement to change the faith (from Lutheran to Orthodox Church), which took place in South Estonia in the 1840s and in North Estonia in the 1880s. In 1897, the percentage of Orthodox among Estonians was 12 (Palli 1998: 29–31).

<sup>6</sup> Thus the worshipping centre in Kükita (Kikita) village was built in 1740. In the middle and the second half of the 18th century, new chapels appeared in Varnja (Varone), Kallaste (Krasnye Gory), Kasepää (Kasepel), Kolkja (Kolki) and Mustvee (Cherna, Chernyi Posad) (Ponomarjova 1999: 33–34). According to Ott Kurs, the first Old Believers' chapel in Mustvee was built in 1795 (1996: 30). According to archival records the worshipping chapels in Mustvee, Kallaste and Piirissaare were completed not later than in 1802 ([www.starover.ee/kirikud](http://www.starover.ee/kirikud)).

Old Believers: their children were baptised in their faith, parents were not married in the Orthodox Church, Old Believers blamed the latter and its ministers. It was prohibited not only to baptise and marry, but also to bury by Old Believer customs. In Tartu, therefore, a chief of police ordered the burial of an Old Believer preceptor (*nastavnik*) at night. In Prichudie villages, Orthodox priests took children away from their parents to be baptised into the Orthodox faith and to be brought up in Russian Orthodox families. Of course, there were also rich and influential people among Old Believers. For example, Old Believer merchants from Dorpat repeatedly bribed the police. But forces were unequal.” (Ponomarjova 1999: 35.)

Also, the older form of liturgy was forbidden, old books, icons and Old Believers’ prayer houses were burnt down by soldiers in the 1830s (Pentikäinen, Raudalainen 1999: 90; see also *Ocherki...* 2004: 105–143).

The Tsar’s manifesto of 1905, in principle, brought about religious tolerance in the Russian Empire. The status of Old Believers and the name *Old Believers* were established. So far the authorities and the enemies of Old Believers called them *Raskolniki*. But the real opportunities for free development were given to Old Believers in Lake Peipsi villages during the period of the independent Republic of Estonia (1918–1940).

### **Old Believers in the Republic of Estonia (1918–1940)**

On the western coast of Lake Peipsi, the religious life of Old Believers remained active throughout the 1920s–1930s. The Republic of Estonia brought about a considerably greater freedom of religion than had existed during the reign of Orthodox Tsars. Yet, Old Believers were also persecuted. They were therefore displeased with the prohibition in 1932 against celebrating church feasts, according to the old calendar. Old Believers refused to hold church services according to the new calendar observed by the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church. A group of the mentors (*nastavnik, batyushka*) predicted that Old Believers’ worship centers would be burnt down and once again expectations of the imminent end of the world started to spread among Old Believers (Sild, Salo 1995: 143, 187; Pentikäinen, Raudalainen 1999: 91). Relations with the authorities became so strained that, in 1935, Old Believers’ worshipping places were closed down and some of the mentors were deported (Berg, Kulu 1996: 1179). After the Old Believers had sent a petition to President Konstantin Päts, the situation received a peaceful solution favorable to the Old Believers.<sup>7</sup>

The number of Old Believers in Estonia remained stable throughout the

1920s-1930s. The census of 1922 counted 5,114 and the one of 1934 – 5,276 Old Believers (Risch 1937: 122, 133), who in both cases constituted 0.5% of the Estonian population, making up the fourth grouping by size after Lutherans, Orthodox and Baptists.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, so far, as a rule, the treatments have presented much bigger figures for Old Believers. According to Kurs and Berg, in the 1930s, the number of Old Believers in the 14 *Prichudie* villages amounted to 7,000–8,000 (1998: 63–64). In addition to that, Old Believers also resided in Tallinn and Tartu, where, besides the ten *Prichudie* congregations their own Old Believers' congregations operated. The total number of Old Believers, in Estonia before World War II, was supposed to have been, according to one estimate, approximately 8000 (Berg, Kulu 1996: 1169), according to others – about 9,000–10,000 (Pentikäinen, Raudalainen 1999: 84; Ponomarjova 1999: 41).<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps it is possible that 8,000–10,000 persons belonged to the aforementioned 12 Old Believers' congregations by birth. Yet, it seems that the number of people, who really considered themselves as Old Believers by faith, was less, by almost half, than the number of those who lived in the Old Believers' villages and were regarded as Old Believers (from the cultural point of view) by researchers. Here, we have to consider the fact that, both at the census of 1922 and 1934, the children's faith was noted down according to their parents' words. Therefore, the small number of Old Believers, in censuses, is not related to the fact that children were omitted. It is also possible that some researchers have included many of the Orthodox in the Peipsi region among the number of Old Believers.

<sup>7</sup> Pentikäinen, Raudalainen 1999: 91–92. Today, the majority of Estonian Orthodox congregations celebrate their church holidays according to the new calendar and the majority of the Russian Orthodox congregations, as well as Old Believers, still observe the old church calendar.

<sup>8</sup> According to the census of 1934 there were 874,026 Lutherans (78.2% of the population), 207,488 Orthodox (18.4%) and 8,752 Baptists (0.8%) in Estonia. In comparison to the year 1897, the number of Orthodox had increased mainly due to the incorporation of the territories of Põlva and the ones behind the Narva River, which were inhabited predominantly by the Orthodox, into the Republic of Estonia (see Plaata 2001: 148).

<sup>9</sup> The number 10,000 referred to in the article by Pentikäinen and Raudalainen is based on the estimate given by W. Hollberg, a researcher of Old Believers. In 1939, approximately 100,000 Old Believers were supposed to have lived in Latvia and about 80,000 – in Lithuania (1999: 84, 95). In 1939, there were 88 congregations of Old Believers in Latvia. From among the other bigger denominations, Lutherans in Latvia had 319, Catholics – 194, Orthodox – 166 and Baptists – 108 congregations (Goeckel 1995: 204).

The religious and cultural life of Old Believers in *Prichudie* gained impetus in the 1920s–1930s. New centres for worship were built, and their own schools and libraries operated (Pentikäinen, Raudalainen 1999: 92). Local Old Believers maintained close contacts with the spiritual centre of the Baltic Old Believers, the Grebenshchikov congregation in Riga. Gavriil Frolov (1854–1930), an icon painter, was among the most conspicuous local religious leaders. Ponomarjova writes about him as follows:

„G. Frolov was a “fedoseevets” and therefore his mode of life was severe, monastery style. He wore *azyam*<sup>10</sup> from youth, never missed a divine service and ate meals twice a day as was ordered in the Old Believer regulations. Only having worshipped, he started to paint an icon and then consecrated it himself. He spent the earned money on the needs of the community and on the purchase of religious books. G. Frolov gave much attention to children. He taught the old “kriukovoe”<sup>11</sup> chant to several generations. He founded the school to teach Church Slavonic reading and writing. There were G. Frolov’s icons in every *Prichudie* house. He did not give up painting while being very ill. G. Frolov found the means to build the Old Believer church in Raiushi (Raia) and decorated it himself.”<sup>12</sup> (Ponomarjova 1999: 40–41.)

Old Believers’ knowledge of Estonian was generally quite good and their attitude towards Estonian Lutherans was tolerant. Some researchers have claimed that, during the period of independence, the majority of the *Prichudie* Old Believers identified themselves more with Estonians than with their Orthodox compatriots (Kurs, Berg 1998: 63). More and more Estonian loan words came into the Old Believers’ archaic Russian. According to Paul Ariste, in the 1920s–1930s, *Prichudie* Old Believers regarded themselves rather as Christians than as Russians (Berg, Kulu

<sup>10</sup> Old Believers have special worship clothes. *Azyam* is a long men’s wear with narrow sleeves, made of dark fabric. Not all parishioners had *azyams*, but a mentor had it necessarily (Ponomarjova 1999: 37).

<sup>11</sup> Even today some Baltic Old Believers can sing *kriuki*, an ancient form of notation of ecclesiastical chants (Pentikäinen, Raudalainen 1999: 92).

<sup>12</sup> Icons in Raja chapel were in the old Russian icon-painting style. The multilevel iconostasis included about two hundred images of saints and Bible stories. One of the most well-known students of Frolov was Pimen Sofronov (1898–1973), who worked in an icon-painting workshop in Riga in the late 1920s (Ponomarjova 1999: 41).

1996: 1176). It seems that the attitude towards Estonian Lutherans was even more favorable than towards Orthodox Russians. They rather acknowledged the principles of other Christians than those of the Orthodox (so-called Nikonians). Yet, the Old Believers' sense of "selectivity" and mission, and their own peculiar faith, did not allow them the merging with either Estonians or with Orthodox Russians. This was also fostered by the Old Believers' prohibition to marry a person from another faith. It was not so much the nationality but the faith that was still the main foundation for Old Believers' identity in Estonia. Yet, at least according to the census data, the number of Old Believers was much smaller so far than it had been supposed to be.

The relatively peaceful existence of Old Believers in the Republic of Estonia (except for the so-called calendar conflict in the 1930s) was interrupted in 1940, when the era of the five decades of occupation started.

### **Old Believers in the period of Soviet and German occupation (1940–1991)**

In June 1940, the Soviet Army occupied the territory of the Republic of Estonia and it was annexed to the Soviet Union in August. The Soviet suppression of churches and congregations, and religion as a phenomenon opposed to the official atheist ideology, gathered force in Estonia. The new authorities set out to restrict the activities of all congregations in Estonia; the property of the congregations was nationalized, religious publications were banned and the libraries of many congregations were destroyed. Child and youth education, missionary work and foreign relations of churches and congregations were forbidden. In addition, the new authorities persecuted the clergy. From the very beginning of the occupation period, the more outstanding religious activists of various congregations began to disappear.

All this also had its influence on the congregations of Old Believers. Ponomarjova described the first year of Soviet occupation in the area of Old Believers as follows,

"Old Believers were unpleasantly struck by open anti-religious propaganda. The connections with the Grebenshchikov community ceased almost completely. I. N. Zavoloko, a prominent Old Believer figure, had been reported arrested.<sup>13</sup> All local culture-educational societies were abolished. The great part of local Russian leaders was subjected to repression. During these troubled times, Prichudie people lost their spiritual leaders." (Ponomarjova 1999: 43.)



World War II entailed the occupation of Estonia by Nazi Germany in 1941–1944. Even under wartime circumstances, the new power brought some relief to several Estonian churches and congregations. According to Lembit Raid, who wrote from the position of atheism, Old Believers were persecuted by the occupation authorities (1978: 158), yet, according to Ponomarjova, Germans did not pursue Old Believers. At times the Old Believers, with their customary large beards, were suspected to be Russian partisans, but when they identified themselves, the Germans set them free. Many of the Old Believers were also mobilized into the German army.<sup>14</sup>

In 1944, *Prichudie* turned into a bloody battlefield. In Mustvee town and Raja village, many houses were destroyed in the war. The chapels in Raja and Kükita were burnt down as well as the building for worship in Tartu (Ponomarjova 1999: 43).

After the re-occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union in 1944, the arrests and deportations, among the families of leading religious activists, which had started in Estonia in 1940–1941, continued until the 1950s. The war and repression of occupation authorities brought about great losses in the membership of all Estonian denominations, including Old Believers.

Besides that, the NKVD (later KGB) officials, dealing with religious associations and laws of the Soviet Union, started to restrict the activities of congregations. In order to deal with all the non-Orthodox confessions, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults of the Soviet Union was founded in Moscow in 1944, and in Estonia the Estonian Commissioner of the Council was appointed. The Commissioner's main task was to supervise the activities of congregations and their personnel policy. Johannes Kivi, a NKVD reserve officer, was the first to start work as a commissioner at the beginning of 1945. He had to deal with all the

<sup>13</sup> The historian and writer Ivan Zavoloko (1897–1984) founded the Old Believers' circle of enthusiasts whose aim was to study and propagate Russian history and the history of Old Believers. From 1927 to 1933, the magazine "Native Past" (*Rodnaia Starina*) was published in Riga using Zavoloko's personal means and donations. Considerable attention, in this magazine, was also given to the Old Believers in Estonia. Zavoloko himself regularly also visited Old Believers villages in *Prichudie* (Ponomarjova 1999: 40).

<sup>14</sup> As in 1941 Germans occupied Tartu quite quickly, there was no time left to mobilize most of the *Prichudie* men to the Soviet Army before the Germans came. The ones, who had not been mobilized into the Red Army, were, by force, now drafted into the German Army (Ponomarjova 1999: 43).

denominations of Estonia (including Old Believers), except for the Orthodox, for whom a special commissioner was appointed (see: Altnurme 2000: 35 ff.; Plaata 2001: 186 ff.)

The attitude towards different religious groups in Estonia was designed from Moscow, where the Estonian commissioners were given guidelines for their work. Old Believers were regarded as not dangerous by the authorities and this saved them from very severe repression in the post-war period. For instance, in 1947–1948 all the religious organizations in the Soviet Union (except for the Russian Orthodox Church) were divided into four groups according to their allegiance. The first, most loyal group also included, besides Muslims, the Armenian Church and Evangelical Christians-Baptists, the Old Believers.<sup>15</sup>

However, Old Believers in Estonia were also penalized by several restrictions, and they had to go through all the most important restructuring in the religious life of the Soviet Union, which was carried out by the local party, government and security organs, under the leadership of the Commissioner for the Affairs of Religious Cults.

One of the first tasks of the Soviet authorities was to register congregations, which gave them an operating permit. In early 1945, the commissioner Johannes Kivi was given an order from Moscow to start registering the Estonian congregations. By the end of 1945, the Estonian congregations had submitted 388 registration applications, 11 of them by the congregations of Old Believers. From among the Estonian clergy that Commissioner Kivi had registered by July 1, 1946, nine were Old Believers' mentors (ERA, f. R-1989, n. 2, s. 3, l. 49–50, 84). The commissioner had largely completed the registration process by 1947. A great number of Estonian congregations, despite having had applied, were never registered; yet, the 11 Old Believers' congregations were.<sup>16</sup>

According to the estimates of the Commissioner for the Affairs of Religious Cults, the number of Old Believers decreased considerably

<sup>15</sup> The second group included Lutherans and the Reformed Church, the third one – Roman Catholics and Uniates, and the fourth – the underground "sectarians" (Altnurme 2000: 25–26, 30).

<sup>16</sup> In Estonia, independent legal activities were carried on during the Soviet period (up to the 1980s) only by the eight denominations which were officially registered in the 1940s: Lutheran, Orthodox, Catholic and Methodist Churches; Jewish, Old Believers' and the Seventh-Day Adventists' congregations; and the Evangelical Christian and Baptist Union, which comprised free congregations that acted independently before the Soviet period.

during the Soviet period, as was also the case with the other Estonian religious groups. The relevant statistics can be found in the Archive of the Commissioner for the Affairs of Religious Cults (ACARC) and is, as a rule, reliable, being based on the data presented by the congregations themselves. At the same time, the existence of these data is very different by confessions. In 1951, commissioner Kivi complained that it was not possible to figure out the exact number of Old Believers in Estonia, as they do not keep an accurate count. According to Kivi, Old Believers were mostly old people.<sup>17</sup> Differently from the Lutheran Church and Estonian free congregations, whose members and activities were precisely recorded, this kind of deficiency of data about Old Believers in the materials of the ACARC lasted until the termination of the commissioner's institution in 1990. The same also applies to the two denominations – Catholic and Jewish – entrusted under the “care” of the commissioner. There are more data about the number of Old Believers beginning from the early 1960s, when the membership of almost all the denominations in Estonia started to decline. This was largely due to the success of the atheist campaign launched in the late 1950s.

**Table 1. Number of Old Believers in the Estonian SSR in 1961–1989.**<sup>18</sup>

1961	1965	1970	1975	1985	1987	1989
1,600	1,500	900	750	600	600	600

In comparison with the census of 1934, in which 5,276 people in Estonia determined themselves as Old Believers by their faith (Risch 1937: 122, 133), by the mid-1980s the membership of the Old Believers' congregations had decreased by almost nine times according to the data of the Commissioner for the Affairs of Religious Cults. The decline in the membership of Old Believers' congregations from 1,600 in 1961 to 600 in 1989 was one of the largest in Estonia in this period.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> ERAF, f. 1, n. 1–72, s. 26, l. 60–61. In the light of this statement it is difficult to estimate the data of the “Estonian Board for Religious Affairs” presented in the article by Berg and Kulu, according to which as late as in 1946 the 11 Estonian Old Believers' congregations comprised 5,806 people (1996: 1169).

<sup>18</sup> The table has been drawn up on the basis of ACARC, PSO, 1976, d. 201, l. 94–95; 1990, d. 344, l. 60; OS, 1986, d. 3, l. 77 ff.; 1988, d. 3-1, l. 138 ff.; 1990, d. 3, l. 5 ff.

<sup>19</sup> See also Plaata 2001: 221.

However, the figures presented in the table have to be regarded critically. The figures for Old Believers are a rough estimate and, as can be deduced by the round numbers in the table, they cannot be considered as very exact. Most probably these are the estimated total numbers of the people who visited Old Believers' worship buildings in Estonia during great religious feasts.<sup>20</sup>

It must also be taken into account that many believers concealed their connection with congregations, especially after the strengthening of the anti-religious fight, which had started in the late 1950s. Many people did not dare to go to church even on great religious holidays, being afraid of the inspection trips of the representatives of local authorities/informers to churches and the following repression. According to Ponomarjova, Old Believers in Estonia did not really advertise their belonging to the church. Especially in the case of men this could ruin their careers. It was mainly women and elderly people who, in the Soviet period, frequented buildings for worship and often children were also taken along (1999: 44).

On the other hand, it is quite probable that, as was the case with all the other bigger faiths in Estonia, the membership of Old Believers' congregations, in the Soviet time, diminished considerably. The fact, that men and young people detached themselves from Old Believers' congregations, was not so much due to the necessity to conceal their belief, but, similar to the rest of Estonia, the wide spread of secularization in the Old Believers' society. Old people and women also constituted the majority of the faithful membership of their congregations in the other bigger religions in Estonia. By 1987, the actual membership of Estonian denominations had decreased below 5% of the total population of the Estonian SSR. The percentage of the regular churchgoers of all denominations, from the total population of Estonia, had by that time probably decreased below 1% (see Plaat 2001: 221–223).

The relatively small numbers of Old Believers given in Table 1 are still reliable as indicators of the membership more openly and actively related

<sup>20</sup> It is the numbers of those visiting church during the great religious feasts that the ACARC has quoted as the membership of the Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish congregations. For instance, in 1987 the commissioner has quoted as the numbers for the membership of the Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish congregations the estimate number of those visiting churches during the great religious feasts – 13,980, 400 and 160 people, respectively (ACARC, OS, 1988, d. 3-1, l. 138 ff.). Most probably the same method was also used when quoting the number of Old Believers.

to their congregations. The rapid decline in the number of Old Believers, in the 1960s–1970s, is also very likely.<sup>21</sup> All the “old” Estonian denominations (Lutherans, Orthodox, Baptists, Free Believers, etc.) underwent a rapid decline in their active membership in the 1960s–1970s and Old Believers are probably not an exception here. The number of Old Believers quoted in the statistics of the ACARC would diminish even more if we consider, as active membership, only those who regularly go to worship. For instance, according to the report of the commissioner from 1976, 75–80% of the members of the Orthodox, Catholic and Old Believers’ Churches were indifferent and that the churches were almost empty on ordinary Sundays.<sup>22</sup> Probably, in the 1970s–1980s, in Estonia only around one hundred Old Believers went to church regularly every Sunday.

Interviews with Old Believers also testify to the sharp decline in the number of churchgoers, ageing of the participants in services and falling into oblivion of the old religious customs in the Soviet time. From among the customs inherent to Old Believers, keeping the fast, confessing to *nastavnik* and baptizing decreased considerably during the Soviet period. In addition, the tradition of *christoslavy* (glorifying of Christ), when after the Christmas service the preceptor and the *krylos* (choir) go all round the Old Believers’ village glorifying Christ in every house, faded gradually. The former prohibition against smoking and consuming alcohol is not strictly valid any more, either, although until today people are not allowed to smoke in most Old Believers’ houses. Also, the Old Believers’ habit of using different dishes, for their own purpose, and others for alien people, has almost disappeared.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> This seems to be indirectly confirmed also by the fact that in 1990, when on the crest of the “singing revolution” there was no special need to show the real number of believers smaller than it was and the corresponding reports were no longer sent to Moscow, the number of Old Believers in the report for 1989 has remained the same. However, this can also be due to the lack of new data.

<sup>22</sup> In comparison, it can be mentioned that the reports of the 1970s on the regular churchgoers in the Lutheran Church quoted as the number of regular churchgoers constantly only 5–10% of the donating members of the Lutheran Church (ACARC, OS, 1977, d. 1, l. 86 ff.; d. 2, l. 18-21).

<sup>23</sup> Having visited the Old Believers’ villages on Lake Peipsi in 1930, “Paul Ariste wrote: “There are special dishes for people of other faith in every decent house since politeness demands hospitality.” There was also a separate cup for a new mother in Old Believer families. A man who returned home from other places used separate dishes until he was cleansed with prayer. Sharing the same dishes with Orthodox people was regarded as a sin, but it sometimes happened while being away from home.” (Ponomarjova 1999: 39).

Secular funerals also became more popular in the Soviet period. Yet, in the late 1960s about 80% of the deceased in Kallaste were still buried by the Old Believers' preceptor (*s batkoi*) and only in 20% of cases the funeral was secular (*s muzykoi*) (Richter 1969: 60). Similarly to the other denominations in Estonia, the funeral was one of the most significant Old Believers' rites performed in the 1960s–1980s. Yet, in comparison to the rest of Estonia of the Soviet period, secular funeral has assumed less prevalence in the Old Believers' area. For Old Believers, a church funeral has held a special meaning, if not even the most important tradition.<sup>24</sup>

The divergence of Old Believers from their faith and the fading of old rituals were also confirmed by a research conducted by Yelizaveta Richter in 1966. The investigation of 70 families of Kallaste town involved 170 respondents (aged 17 and older). Most of them came from the families of fishermen and descendants of *Pomortsy*. The main results of this research were as follows. A typical feature of the population of Kallaste in 1966 was the indifference to religion and to the dogmas preached by *nastavniks*. The problems of the religious morale had lost their former significance and people did no longer observe the strict prescriptions concerning the norms of conduct. The chapel of Old Believers in town had lost its predominant role in the life of town which it had enjoyed before the Soviet times, when religion strongly influenced the whole way of life in Kallaste ("religion was the law for everyone"). At the same time, the former isolation of the Old Believers from adherents to other religions had disappeared according to Richter.

In every age set investigated in 1966,<sup>25</sup> women were more religious than men. The sharp decline of religiousness started in the groups of respondents younger than 46 years. The most religious people were older than 56 and even among them most respondents did not observe all the rules prescribed by their religion. For instance, they did not fast and went

<sup>24</sup> Ponomarjova wrote: "A burial was the most significant of rites. Before a burial three or four men read in turn psalms beside the deceased. Usually all village inhabitants and acquaintances of the deceased, from neighbouring villages, came to a burial. An icon was carried in front of a coffin, the coffin was covered by cloth, the preceptor with a censer followed the coffin. There was a commemorative feast for the preceptor, relatives and neighbours after a burial. There was a custom to worship, to hold commemorative services in the third, ninth and fortieth day after a death." (1999: 39). Old Believers have mostly preserved these funeral rituals until today.

<sup>25</sup> Richter, in her analysis, divided the informants into four age groups: 17–32, 33–45, 46–55-year-olds and those aged 56 and older (1969: 56).

to chapel only on great feasts. In the group of respondents older than 56 years, 25% of men and 32% of women attended chapel regularly<sup>26</sup> and 13% of men and 12% of women kept fasts regularly.<sup>27</sup> According to Richter, only the latter can be called “god’s people”, because they regularly kept fasts, confessed to *batyushka*, attended clerical services, lit the icon-lamp in the holy corner of their houses and wanted their grandchildren to be baptized. Some of them did not watch TV, since it was “connected with the Antichrist”.

The results of this research are reliable, although here we have to take into consideration the fact that this period was hostile towards religion, when only articles dealing with the triumph of atheism were published. Richter has mostly elicited these percentages that reflected the decline of religiousness. When showing the decreasing importance of religion, Richter, nevertheless, claimed that in Kallaste “the significance of the clerical rites is relatively considerable” (see Richter 1969).

The results of the Kallaste study could probably be viewed as also applying to Old Believers’ settlements on the coast of Lake Peipsi. In the Soviet time, a great part of the Estonian Old Believers resided in the towns of Kallaste and Mustvee. In 1985, for instance, according to the data of the Commissioner for the Affairs of Religious Cults almost one half of the Estonian Old Believers lived in towns and urban settlements (ACARC, OS, 1986, t. 3, l. 77–78), i.e., mostly in Kallaste, Mustvee, Tallinn and Tartu.

In conclusion, it can be said that in the Soviet time the number of those faithful to Old Beliefs decreased and their average age increased rapidly. The main reasons for that were the successful anti-religious struggle in the Soviet Union, young people’s leaving *Prichudie* settlements for towns and losing contacts with their congregations<sup>28</sup> as well as the rapid

<sup>26</sup> From among the 170 respondents, 27 persons (16%) were regular churchgoers. At the same time, Richter claimed that actually only 10–16 elderly persons participated in the service on ordinary Sundays (1969: 57).

<sup>27</sup> Here Richter probably means the persons who regularly kept all the Old Believers’ fasts (*rozhdstvenskii*, *uspenskii* and Lent, as well as weekly Wednesday and Friday fasts). In the younger groups of respondents nobody kept fasts regularly (see Richter 1969: 56). Yet, more people kept fasts once a year.

<sup>28</sup> In 1996 Berg and Kulu wrote that during the past twenty years the number of inhabitants on Piirissaar Island had decreased by three and in Peipsiääre rural municipality by two times and in Raja rural municipality and in Kallaste about 20%. In 1989, elderly people in Peipsiääre rural municipality constituted 42% and on Piirissaar Island even 88% of the whole population (1996: 1170–1171).

secularization process that took place in Estonian society. Yet, Old Believers were able to survive the Soviet period, their congregations were not closed down and their *nastavniks* worked in most of them. While in 1938 twelve Old Believers' congregations had altogether eight *nastavniks*, then in 1976 eleven congregations had seven *nastavniks* (that year all over Estonia 363 congregations with 231 clergymen operated altogether). In 1976, the average age of *nastavniks* was very high – 73 years (the average age of Estonian clergymen was 60 years). In comparison we might mention that, in 1976, the Orthodox Church had 51 priests for 86 congregations and the number of Orthodox congregations had fallen by approximately three times in comparison to the year 1938. In addition to that fact, in 1987 Pühtitsa Nunnery of the Russian Orthodox Church operated with 148 residents (see Plaat 2001: 446-447).

It is an interesting and little known fact that in the Soviet time Old Believers had an operating, partly underground, *skit* (Old Believers' monastery) in Raja village. As is revealed in the interview of Zossima Iotkin, the long-time mentor of Raja congregation, to the author, the local authorities just closed their eyes to the fact and let the monastery operate in peace, without reporting about it to the central authorities. The monastery operated in a house next to the chapel that had been burnt down in wartime. At present, the same house is also used for holding services.<sup>29</sup> The tower of Raja chapel was restored by the congregation in 1990. By that year, freedom of religion had been established in Estonia, which happened due to the so-called singing revolution of the late 1980s.

### **Old Believers in the Republic of Estonia (1991–2004)**

After the revolutionary events in Estonian society, which in 1991 resulted in the regaining of independence of the Republic of Estonia, religious life in Estonia has again returned to normal. During the registration of churches and congregations, in the first half of the 1990s, the Union of Old Believer Parishes of Estonia was also re-established and registered. As formerly, it comprises eleven congregations, nine of them in *Prichudie* (Mustvee, Raja, Kükita, Kallaste, Väike-Kolkja, Suur-Kolkja, Kasepää, Varnja, Piirissaar) and one both in Tallinn and Tartu. Besides the Raja congregation, all of them have their own chapels. Yet, many of them have been plundered during the past decades.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Interview: Zossima Iotkin – J. Plaat 1995: Raja village, Jõgeva County.



From the 1990s onwards it is possible to talk about the Old Believer revival in Estonia. The Old Believers of Estonia strive for the revival of old traditions. Many Old Believers' descendants willingly baptize their children in worship centers. Old Believers' chapels are crowded at Easter. Their activities have been fostered by the Society of Old Believer Culture and Development founded in Tartu in 1998, as well as several other organizations aiming at the development of *Prichudie*. Old Believers' congregations have jointly celebrated the days of their home churches in different villages. For instance, the feast of apostles Paul and Peter was celebrated on Piirissaar Island in 1999. The tradition of *christoslavy* (glorifying of Christ after the Christmas night service) is being revived. At Kolkja School Old Believers' children have classes on religious topics.

However, this revival can be regarded rather as an outward indication of respecting traditions, under the conditions of the re-established freedom of religion, and not as a sign of religious upheaval. Old Believers do not pay special attention to missionary work and the active membership of congregations has not increased considerably in the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most of the baptized Old Believers go to buildings for worship only during great religious feasts. The interviews conducted with the more active Old Believers in 2003 testify to the fact that the extinction of Old Believers' traditions, due to the death of the older generation and elderly *batyushkas*, is quite real.<sup>31</sup>

In this light, we should critically consider the statement presented on the home page of Estonian Old Believers claiming that "Now there are almost 15 thousand Old Believers by birth in Estonia."<sup>32</sup> This figure can definitely not be considered as the number of Old Believers by faith.

Numerical data about Old Believers have been sketchy and also often unreliable during the independence period. In 1995, the Department of

<sup>30</sup> Varnja, Kolkja, Kallaste, Mustvee, Kükita and Tartu worshipping buildings have been broken into and icons have been stolen, in some of them even several times. In several churches, there are empty spaces in iconostases, where the stolen icons were.

<sup>31</sup> These interviews were conducted during the ethnological survey in 2003 in Kolkja, Kasepää and Varnja villages. This field work in *Prichudie* Old Believers area constitutes a part of the ethnological and sociological survey project "The Subcultures of the Estonian Russians, Old Believers and other non-Estonians in East-Virumaa and Lake Peipsi Region from 1940 to 2005" financed by the Estonian Science Foundation.

<sup>32</sup> See [www.starover.ee/kirikud.html](http://www.starover.ee/kirikud.html).

Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs asked all Estonian denominations for their membership data. The figure for Old Believers – 10,000 – presented by the Ministry of Internal Affairs is clearly exaggerated if we bear in mind the actual membership of Old Believers' congregations. As of January 1 2000, according to the data from the Department of Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs there were 5,000<sup>33</sup> Old Believers (see Au, Ringvee 2000: 140–141).

According to the research of Berg and Kulu, by the census of 1989, 3,500 Old Believers' descendants might have lived in the Peipsi-Russian area (Mustvee and Kallaste towns and Raja, Peipsiääre and Piirissaare rural municipalities), and they constitute the “present core of the Old Believers' descendants”. Even from them in the 1990s only “elderly, mostly retired people, above all, women” were the carriers of Old Belief (1996: 1170, 1178). This estimation is probably much nearer to the truth, as is also the opinion of Pentikäinen and Raudalainen that in the 1990s the number of *Prichudie* Old Believers might have been approximately 2,000–2,500 (1999: 86).

The 2000 Population Census of Estonia, which asked the question “What is your religious affiliation?”<sup>34</sup> offers us the most reliable figures about the number of those considering themselves as Old Believers by faith (not by culture or by origin). The options given at the census were as follows: 1) follower of a particular faith, 2) has no religious affiliation, 3) atheist, 4) cannot define affiliation, 5) refused to answer. The followers of a particular faith had to indicate their faith. At the census of 2000, 2,515 inhabitants of Estonia (0.2% of those who answered the question about faith) determined themselves as Old Believers. There were 2,390 Russians (95%), 91 Estonians and 34 representatives of other nations among Old Believers.<sup>35</sup> Six faiths in Estonia had more adherents than Old Believers

<sup>33</sup> Probably it is a misprint, as in 1998 the Department of Religious Affairs quotes the membership of Old Believers' congregations as 500 (*A ja O...* 1999: 340). Yet, this figure as the active membership of Old Believers' congregations is considerably more realistic than 5,000.

<sup>34</sup> The census data are taken from: *2000. aasta...* 2001: 78–79; *2000. aasta...* 2002: 17–19, 316–322, 328; [www.stat.ee](http://www.stat.ee).

<sup>35</sup> The proportion of Old Believers among non-Estonians has decreased considerably due to the Soviet-time mass immigration. Also the number of Old Believers compared to the Estonian Orthodox is negligible. According to the 2000 census 351,178 Russians lived in Estonia, which constituted as the largest group of non-Estonians 25.6% of the population. From among the Russians who answered the question about faith, 38.5% or 104,698 persons determined themselves as Orthodox.

(Lutherans, Orthodox, Baptists, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals<sup>36</sup>).

Here we have to bear in mind that answering the question about faith was optional.<sup>37</sup> Also only 15-year-olds and older people answered this question. The number of Estonian Old Believers would be considerably bigger if we took into account all the baptized Old Believer children and also those who were once baptized, but have drifted away from religion and also expressed their indifference towards it at the census.

Among 2,515 adult Old Believers, there were 1,497 women and 1,018 men. 1,035 of them lived in rural settlements and 1,480 – in towns (483 in Tartu, 275 in Tallinn, and the rest of them mainly in Kallaste, Mustvee and East-Virumaa towns). From the counties, Tartumaa had the largest number of Old Believers (1,472, apart from Tartu and Kallaste also in Peipsiääre and Piirissaare rural municipalities<sup>38</sup>). It was followed by Jõgevamaa (600, in Mustvee and Kasepää rural municipalities<sup>39</sup>), Harjumaa (282, mainly in Tallinn) and East-Virumaa (108). If we leave out the town of Tartu, then approximately 1500 adult Old Believers lived on the coast of Lake Peipsi (in Tartumaa and Jõgevamaa counties).

When speaking about the educational level, it is conspicuous that, in comparison to other confessions, among the 2,515 Old Believers the percentage of those without basic education and with only basic education is the highest (23.6% and 28.6%, respectively). From the rest of the Old Believers, 31.7% have secondary education, 10.2% – secondary special education and 4.5% – higher education.

<sup>36</sup> 152,237 persons at the age of 15 and older determined themselves as Lutherans and 143,554 persons – as Orthodox (14.8% and 13.9% of those who answered the question about faith, respectively). The percentage of the other confessions among the respondents remained below 0.6. Russians constituted 72.9% of the Estonian Orthodox. Among those who admitted to be Orthodox, the percentage of Estonians was 12.9 (see in more detail: Plaata 2002: 103–104).

<sup>37</sup> 8.1% of the population of Estonia did not answer the optional question about faith. It can be presumed that, while doing so, the majority of them expressed their indifference towards religion. 1890 persons considered themselves as followers of a particular faith, but did not specify it. If we take into account the whole population of Estonia, then the followers of a particular faith would constitute 23.9 %, from among those who answered the question about faith, the followers of a particular faith constituted 31.8 %.

<sup>38</sup> In 2000, 992 people lived in Peipsiääre rural municipality (of whom 9% were Estonians) and 104 in Piirissaare rural municipality (17% of them were Estonians).

<sup>39</sup> In 2000, 1418 people lived in Kasepää rural municipality (40% of them were Estonians). In this rural municipality, the number of Old Believers was largest in Raja village, whose population was 478 (10% of them Estonians).

The traditional Old Believers' centers, Kallaste and Mustvee, were the only towns in Estonia where believers constituted more than 50% of the adult population: in Kallaste – 62.5% (600 persons from the 961 who answered the question about faith) and in Mustvee – 50.5% (710 persons from the 1,406 respondents).<sup>40</sup> In Mustvee, the numbers for Old Believers and Orthodox were almost equal (17.3% and 17.7%, respectively), and Lutherans constituted 14.5%. In Kallaste, the percentage of Old Believers was 35.6, that of Orthodox – 18 and that of Lutherans – 7.3.

The fact that Kallaste and Mustvee were towns with the greatest proportion of believers was due to the high percentage of Russian population and the existence of both the Orthodox and Old Believers in these towns. The results of the 2000 census indicate clearly that the Russians living in Estonia are far more religious than Estonians.<sup>41</sup> The rule that the greater is the proportion of Russians, the greater is the percentage of religious people also applies to other Estonian towns.<sup>42</sup> The greatest proportion of religious people in Estonian counties was in East-Virumaa (40.4%), where the proportion of Russians and other non-Estonians is the highest, compared to all the other counties in Estonia.

The greater religiousness of Russians is above all related to the popularity of Orthodoxy among the Russian population (if we compare it to Lutheranism among Estonians). However, it can probably also be maintained about Estonian Old Believers that the proportion of believers among them is much greater than among Estonians. In comparison to Lutheran Estonians, the number of those, who determined themselves as Old Believers at the census, does not seem to be so small any more.

Russians constituted as much as 95% of the Old Believers in 2000, and indirectly this testifies to the fact that the former endogamous way of life,

<sup>40</sup> Together with the ones who did not answer the question about faith, there were 986 people (15-year-olds and older) in Kallaste and 1,424 in Mustvee.

<sup>41</sup> Nearly all the sociological surveys carried out in the 1990s also reveal that in comparison to Estonians, the Russians and other non-Estonians who live in Estonia are considerably more religious, at least as regards connection with traditional Christianity (see: *Plaat 2000, 2002, 2003*).

<sup>42</sup> The next ones on the list were - with also predominantly Russian-speaking population - Narva-Jõesuu (48.5% of the respondents were religious), Kohtla-Järve (42.9%), Maardu (42.8%), Jõhvi (42.7%), Narva (40.8%) and also Võru, which is the first town on the list with predominantly Estonian-speaking population (35.8%). Due to the great number of Russians, Tallinn with 35.5% was also above the Estonian average (34%).

when Old Believers married only within their own faith, has survived to a certain extent even up to now. Mixed marriages are still rare among those who determine themselves as Old Believers. Differentiation from other confessions has also been preserved until now. Berg and Kulu point out how Russians, in Old Believers' villages and towns on Lake Peipsi, distinguish between the "own" and the "alien". Not only Estonians, but the Russians who came from afar, the Orthodox Russians, and atheists are alien (1996: 1177).

Yet, it does not mean that Old Believers have a negative attitude towards other nations. For instance, their attitude towards Estonians throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century has rather been more benevolent than hostile. Hopefully the same could be said about Estonians, whose attitude towards the singular ethnic group, who have resided in Estonia for centuries, has usually been more favourable than towards the Russians who settled here in the Soviet time. Attitude towards the Old Believers' religion has also been favourable, although no difference can be made with Orthodoxy, which has spread widely in Estonia since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The latter can be claimed on the basis of a sociological survey of religion, which was conducted in seven Estonian counties in 1996–2002.<sup>43</sup> Besides other topics, the respondents were asked to express their attitude towards Estonian denominations, if they agreed to do it and knew something about the denominations mentioned in the list (30 in all). On a 1–6 scale the highest estimation was given to the Lutheran Church (average 5.3). This was followed by the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church (4.4), the Russian Orthodox Church in Estonia<sup>44</sup> (4.3) and – ranging as the fourth – Old Believers (4.0). All the other confessions lagged behind, with 3.9 points Old Believers were followed by the presumably popular *Taara* and Earth Faith and the Roman Catholic Church.

Until today religion has served as the main basis for Old Believers'

<sup>43</sup> In this study supervised by J. Plaata 17-year-olds and older people selected by random choice were questioned in seven counties.

<sup>44</sup> In the research, this name was given to the Orthodox Church, which unites predominantly Russian congregations and was registered only in 2002 under the subordination of Moscow Patriarchate. This was done in order to differentiate them from the EAOC congregations with predominantly Estonian membership, under the subordination of Constantinople.

identity,<sup>45</sup> yet, its role in their identity has diminished considerably since the Soviet period. Also great differences between generations have developed here. In the lives of those born in the 1960s and later, the Old Belief has lost its significance and by their attitudes young or middle-aged people, who come from Old Believers' families, are becoming closer and closer to other Estonian Russians. Their identity is rather ethno-linguistic than religious. The aforementioned process is also confirmed by the younger generation's considerably poorer knowledge of Estonian in comparison to the Old Believers of older generations. Most of the latter can speak Estonian well. Nowadays the main carriers of Old Belief are the older generation and women (see Berg, Kulu 1996: 1172–1173, 1176–1178). For them, religion still seems to be the basis for their identity. At the same time, it is mainly elderly people and women who have already maintained Old Believers' traditions for decades<sup>46</sup>, and supposedly many young people, who come from Old Believers' families, will resume their ancestors' faith when they become older.

## Summary

Russian Old Believers immigrated to Estonia starting from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and established their permanent settlements on the western coast of Lake Peipsi in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They have lived there until today, not mixing with the local Lutheran Estonians and Orthodox and non-believers-Russians. Differentiating between “own” and “alien” by faith has helped Old Believers to preserve their cultural identity until the present time. Up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religion served as the basis of identity for most *Prichudie* Old Believers; after that younger generations started to gradually secede from their ancestors' religion. In the past few decades, it has mainly been the older generation of Old Believers that has actively adhered to religion. For the younger and middle-aged people, ethnic and linguistic identity has acquired more significance. The aforementioned has assisted in breaking down the still existing barrier

<sup>45</sup> According to the survey conducted in 1994–1995, 40% of the Lake Peipsi Old Believers considered their faith very important and 41% regarded it as important, whereas 60% maintained that their families revealed either very or fairly characteristic features of Old Believers (Berg, Kulu 1996: 1177).

<sup>46</sup> About the greater religiousness of elderly people and women see, e.g., Plaata 2001: 317–318, 368–370.

between Old Believers and other Estonian Russians, Orthodox and non-believers (*Sovetskie*), who immigrated to Estonia in the Soviet period. The isolation of Old Believers has also been disintegrated by the emigration of young people from *Prichudie* settlements to Estonian towns in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the course of time, the attitude of Old Believers towards other Russians has become more tolerant, whereas, as a rule, at least in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Estonians have enjoyed a positive attitude among them (and also vice versa).

Changes in Old Believers' demographic situation are related to their religious and cultural identity. In the 18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the majority of Old Believers were confirmed adherents of Old Belief – Orthodoxy which was practised before Patriarch Nikon's reforms. Old Believers' numbers in *Prichudie* increased especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1855, it amounted to 3,278 and also kept growing in the following decades. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the number of those Old Believers' descendants, who do not identify themselves as religious Old Believers, but whose cultural identity is related to Old Believers' culture and who might also be baptized as Old Believers, has gradually increased. While, in the 1920s–1930s, different researchers estimated the number of Estonian Old Believers to be 8,000–10,000, then at censuses slightly over 5,000 people (including children) determined their religion as the Old Belief. At the census of 2000, 2,515 adult citizens of Estonia regarded themselves as followers of the Old Belief. This number is, by far, passed by the different figures offered by Old Believers themselves, which denoted "Old Believers by birth" and amount up to 15,000. Yet, if we take into account the Old Believers who frequent worshipping buildings and observe the most important rituals, this 2,500 can also be an overestimate. Today, the majority of active Old Believers is constituted by elderly women, as was also the case in the Soviet time. In the early 1960s, approximately 1,600 and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 1980s about 600 people went to Old Believers' worshipping places in Estonia during great religious feasts. Supposedly this number is not remarkably bigger nowadays than it was at the low point of the 1980s. Since the Soviet period, the number of those who regularly participate in Sunday services and confessions, keep fasts and observe other Old Believers' rituals has been even several times less.

Changes in Old Believers' identity and demographic situation have also been related to the attitude of authorities. However, the number of the Old Believers, who were generally used to persecution, did not decrease during the period of severe repression in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but rather increased. It was the secularization of society that had a stronger impact on

the religiousness of Old Believers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than state power. As a result, the number of active Old Believers has diminished gradually, especially since the Soviet period, when the authorities' anti-religious policy fostered secularization. However, a substantial turn in the religiousness of Old Believers cannot either be detected in the independent Republic of Estonia, under the conditions of freedom of religion. What might be noticed in the last decade is the strengthening of Old Believers' cultural identity, which, at great religious feasts, rallies hundreds of Old Believers from all over Estonia. Also, many of the descendants of Old Believers, who are actually not really religious any more, from time to time participate in great religious feasts, identify themselves with Old Believers' culture and have their children baptized. Hopefully, the singularity of the subculture, which has survived in Estonia for centuries, will be developed also in the European Union, to the integration into which Lake Peipsi Old Believers objected the most in Estonia.

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