

LATVIAN OLD BELIEVER RITE OF BAPTISM: TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION UNDER THE IMPACT OF SOVIET SECULARIZATION (1940S–1980S)

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ABSTRACT

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This paper analyzes the specificity of the Old Believer (Eastern [Russian] Orthodox) rite of baptism – the sacrament of initiation into the Holy Church of Jesus Christ – rooted in the tradition of early Christianity. It is based on a literature review and narratives recorded in the eastern region of Latvia (Latgale) from the 1970s to 2021 during oral history, areal linguistic and folklore expeditions. The empirical evidence is selected from the collection of Daugavpils University Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences and reveals typical features of Old Believer baptism as well as changes in the performance of the traditional ritual in the middle and second half of the twentieth century under Soviet occupation (1940–1941; 1944/45–1990) and forced secularization. The use of oral history sources allows us to reconstruct historically, politically and socially significant past events from a subjective perspective. Being the carrier of specific religious, social and cultural information, the Old Believer rite of baptism remained of crucial significance for members of the religious community in Latvia in order to identify themselves with family, and denomination and pass down the values and traditions of their ancestors to the next generation. During the unfavourable conditions of forced secularization aimed at gradually eliminating religious belief, various forms of religiosity were suppressed and persecuted. Despite many limitations, for the Old Believers in Latvia the rite of baptism remained one of the crucial manifestations of their belief. However, due to changes in human behaviour, the baptismal ceremony became an individual family matter rather than a community event, as it was performed in secret.

Keywords: Old Believers; rites of transition; baptism; values; Soviet Latvia; transformations

1. INTRODUCTION

A lifecycle is a process of going through distinct phases and changes. Rites of transition assist individuals in making the changes necessary for their growth and development and imply a transformation that includes a change of “social and spatial state” (Salet, 2018, p. 1). Rites of transition have been described by some researchers as highly stable, both over time and in a given geographical space (Paukštytė-Šaknienė, 2007, p. 115). At the same time, there is an opinion amongst researchers of ritual practice that “the local uses of

ceremonies, rites and symbolic acts differ highly across time and space” (Salet, 2018, p. 3). Studying rituals from the perspective this allows us to study the transformation processes of transition rituals under the influence of historical, social and political factors. This approach is implemented in this study on the example of the rite of baptism – the sacrament of initiation into the Holy Church of Jesus Christ.

In the rite of baptism, several fundamental aspects of life overlap. First, it is a *religious (Christian) aspect*. In the New Testament, baptism symbolizes repentance, forgiveness of sins and holiness; it is the means of salvation and of reaching the Kingdom of Heaven. It manifests itself in identification with Jesus Christ and acceptance into the Church, as all being baptized in Christ “become Abraham’s offspring” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Galatians 3:29) and receive the heavenly Father’s praise and acclaim (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Matthew 3:17). Through their baptism with holy water, representing the water of the River Jordan in which Jesus was baptized, the child is anointed for their “future mission”. The ritual thus symbolizes the likeness between the child and Jesus Christ, presenting a promise of eternal life, as those who “have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Galatians 3:27). After Jesus Christ’s baptismal act, the heavens were opened to him and he saw “the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Matthew 3:16). Baptism is a part of the holy triad signifying uniqueness: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Ephesians 4:5). Baptism also simulates the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Romans 6). Baptismal initiation in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is the task Jesus Christ entrusted to his disciples after his resurrection. The baptized gain salvation and receive the divine gifts of the Holy Ghost – the promise to the present generation and their descendants, “and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Acts 2:39). In general, baptism guides the baptized to live righteously in grace and spirit on Earth and prepare for eternal life. Thus, baptism can be considered a revelation of the filial relationship between Christ and the Christian.

In a three-part cycle of transition rituals (baptism, wedding, funeral), baptism carries a special semantic load. Baptism is not only the first stage of the cycle, attesting to the beginning of a new life and the official acknowledgement of a new society member; it also reveals this person’s identity or group membership – to which specific family, kin, denomination and/or religious group they belong. It is an essential part of perception within the Christian world and the means to enter into the Christian community (DeMaris, 2013). Those who have been baptized receive the baptismal birthright to experience life within the holy family of Christians and even to claim a place in the Church’s hierarchy and access its teaching (Mahoney, 2019). This is how the *social aspect* of a baptismal ritual manifests itself.

Acting as “a kind of microchip”, baptism contains significant and nation-specific cultural information, which for Christian society provides the possibility of “the expression of religious life through layers of symbols and meanings and the transmission of this religious knowledge and power to successive generations” (Kennedy Neville, 1994, p. 13). The baptismal act, as a ritual of initiation, prescribes the inclusion and use of specific attributes, symbols and actions; if these are not observed, the full ritual procedure is impossible. This is how the *cultural aspect* of a baptismal ritual manifests itself.

“Ritualism” (attachment to customs) in this sense is one of the cultural practices that ensures the preservation of cultural meanings. The ancient form is used as a cultural code that preserves a specific content that can only be “read” (discovered) by the “consecrated”, i.e., a person who is practically involved in the tradition (Pazuhina, 2006, p. 210).

A member of Christian society appreciates and develops their own awareness about the role of baptism in the life of his/her family, kin and community/group and the significance of actions and attributes related to this rite. This occurs only over time, with the individual having reached a certain level of maturity (Perry & Longest, 2019, p. 893), although basic knowledge about baptism is acquired in childhood – both at home from within the family circle and in church or a house of prayer via members of the community. This ensures that this knowledge is preserved and the ritual practice is continued despite the influence of external and internal factors.

Old Believers – an ethnic and religious minority in Latvia – are Eastern (Russian) Orthodox Christians who preserve Russian Orthodox religious traditions that existed before the Great Schism – the reforms implemented by secular and church authorities of the Russian Empire in the 1660s. In the second half of the seventeenth century, Old Believers fleeing persecution settled in the territory of present-day Latvia (Korolova et al., 2020). The first groups of Old Believers settled in the southeastern region of Latvia, where Catholics were the dominant religious community (Pazuhina, 2014). Latvian Old Believers practice the traditions of the priestless (*Bespopovtsy*) group of the Pomorian (*Pomortsy*) denomination and use “Russian Old Orthodox” as a self-applied name (Korolova et al., 2021). Currently, the majority of Latvian Old Believer parishes are

administered by the Old Orthodox Pomorian Church of Latvia. According to data provided by this community, it consists of about 70,000 followers (Korolova et al., 2021).

This study analyzes the tradition of Old Believer baptismal initiation and its transformation under the impact of secularization implemented by the Soviet power in Latvia (1940–1941; 1944/45–1990). It presents an analysis of the character of the baptismal ceremony and the features that are specific to how it is performed by Old Believers living in the Latgale region – the south-eastern part of Latvia. The description offered is from the perspective of Old Believers themselves, who are direct eyewitnesses and participants of such events.

The forms of religious behaviour of Old Believers during the Soviet period have been investigated by Nadežda Pazuhina in her article “Everyday religiosity as ‘elsewhere’ of socialist reality: Spoken narratives of the Orthodox Old Believers in Latgale” (Pazuhina, 2021). The research is based on in-depth interviews with Old Believers, recorded from 2006 to 2016 in the region under analysis, and represents spoken narratives of various generations in terms of their everyday life during the Soviet period (1950s–1970s). Particular experiences of preserving Old Believer religiosity during the Soviet period are discussed by Maija Grizāne in the article “Soviet secularisation: The experience of the Old Believers in eastern Latvia” (Grizāne, 2022). Based on the life stories of Old Believers born in the 1920s and 1930s, the author explores their strategies of preserving (or not) religious tradition under the ideology of atheism and determines people’s reasons for keeping or abandoning religious practice. The ritual praxis of Old Believers in Latvia, including during the Soviet period, receives a detailed description in two collectively written publications based on in-depth interviews with Latgale region inhabitants: “Transformations of Old Believer wedding rites in Latvia: the case of Latgale”, which analyzes Old Believer wedding rites practiced for over a century to crystallize the most significant tendencies at different stages of Latvian cultural history (Korolova et al., 2021) and “Transformations of the Old Believer funeral ceremony in Latvia under the impact of Soviet secularization”, which focuses on the character and transformations of Latgalian Old Believer funeral rituals and ceremonies under Soviet occupation (Kačāne et al., 2023). In this respect, the present paper, devoted to baptismal traditions and their transformation, can be considered a continuation of research done by the above-mentioned authors which, due to the topicality of this theme, is an essential and novel contribution to research on the ritual praxis of religious minorities in Latvia.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative study is based on narrative analysis and uses reconstructive cross-analysis. The dataset comes from an interview collection stored in the Oral History Centre at Daugavpils University Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences (henceforth MV), which includes 153 life stories of Old Believers from the Latgale region population, recorded in 2003–2021. It also draws on the *Dialectical Dictionary of Latgale Old Believers* (Koroljova, 2017, 2020), which presents data collected during oral history, areal linguistic and folklore expeditions in the Latgale region since the 1970s. The interviews are important sources for understanding family and community history and include testimonies of “silent” or non-violent resistance during the Soviet occupation in Latvia. The use of oral history sources in the research allows us to reconstruct historically, politically and socially significant past events from the subjective perspective of the interviewee.

The majority of the respondents were born in the first half of the twentieth century to Old Believer families, were raised in a religious household, received religious education in prayer houses and at school, and spent a major part of their lives in Latgale – the eastern part of Latvia. Thematically relevant life stories of Old Believers (n = 16; males – 4, females – 12) and interviews from the dictionary (n = 18) on the rite of baptism were selected to depict both the customs of the Old Believer baptism rite and its transformation in the Soviet period.

Latgale, a predominantly Catholic region, is of particular interest for the study due to its relatively high level of religiosity and greater proportion of ethnic and religious minorities (among them Old Believers) in comparison to other regions in Latvia. Latgale “remained religious throughout the decades of Soviet occupation” despite being “the special target of atheist propaganda” (Kiope et al., 2020, p. 141, p. 147).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historically, Old Believers have always attempted to maintain the canons of their ethno-denominational group, including those of religious traditions and rituals. The studied recordings of Latvian Old Believers’ life stories testify to their efforts “to preserve ancient Orthodox religion in all manifestations of its characteristic features”, including by “keeping rites” (Koroljova, 2017, p. 333). Respondents made efforts to

convey the idea of passing down religious heritage to their descendants by teaching them that Old Believers “are the truest keepers of the old faith and ancient Christian rites” (Koroljova, 2020, p. 444).

The worldview and perceptions of the Old Believers community in Latvia is not substantially different from the those of Old Believers who emigrated from Russia to other territories of the world, although over time – and under the influence of different political, economic and social factors – various region-specific features have developed in how the rituals are practiced and observed. In the course of various tragic historical events and repressions (wars, changes of power, living under totalitarianism), the “social microenvironment” of local Old Believer community made it possible for Old Believers “to dissociate themselves from the state and live in accordance with the internal hierarchy and norms of a believers’ community”, regulating themselves “through religious rites that sphere of private life which affects the most important events in life (baptism, funeral, confession)” (Pazuhina, 2012, pp. 241–242).

The following two sections present data on the traditional Old Believer rite of baptism and its transformation under Soviet occupation.

3.1 Tradition: Old Believer Rite of Baptism

Old Believers in Latvia acknowledge baptism (and confession) as sacraments. For centuries, baptism has been performed by laypersons (where the need arises) and also as an actual religious practice conducted by spiritual fathers or spiritual leaders (*nastavniki*) in Old Believers’ prayer houses (*molennije*) (Podmazov 2010; Pazuhina, 2014). This tradition is rooted in “the ancient canons of the Eastern Orthodox Church, including the canons of the Russian Orthodox Church, which allow baptism and confession for a lay person” (Brikmanis, 2010). According to scholars, “the mission of preservation of ancestral values cannot be reduced only to the preservation of a dead canon: Old Believers’ virtues retain their significance only due to their practical observance” (Pazuhina, 2006, p. 210).

According to the perceptions of Old Believers in Latvia, the baptismal ritual performs two basic functions.

First, it allows the baptized to maintain distance from everything sinful, for example, from all that is dangerous and misleading for a religious person. According to Koroljova, “an unbaptized child, [is like] an imp – [you can] neither kiss, nor fondle him” (2017, p. 117) and “if someone is not baptized, he will be in the darkness” (2020, p. 193). After baptism “not demons, but angels follow him, and immediately the child becomes calmer” (2017, p. 116). As a result of the act of baptizing, if all necessary conditions have been observed, the child is given into God’s hands and lives their life in compliance with canons translated by God and the spiritual fathers, namely, in the way a “true” Old Believer must live.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, especially in the countryside, Old Believers tried to baptize children as soon as possible (MV 616, personal communication, July 11, 2009), since there was a high risk of falling ill and dying and the soul of the unbaptized child would not be taken in the Kingdom of Heaven.¹ In cases of great urgency, baptism could take place at the child’s home. As MV recalls, when a two-week-old daughter refused to take the breast-milk:

so, I thought [she] would die, [she must be baptized] immediately, the *pop* [spiritual leader]² was called and [he baptized the child] at home. [...] [she was baptized] in cold water, it was autumn [...], but, you know, this was like medicine (MV 451, personal communication, June 28, 2007).

A child’s name is of great importance for Old Believers and was chosen carefully from a list offered by church books. The name given to a child demonstrates their belonging to “the holy” world and protection from “the satanic”. As soon as the child was born, it was given the name of the holy person commemorated in the church calendar on that day (Koroljova, 2017, p. 171).

They [spiritual leaders] gave names according to those church books, according to the day [the child] was born on [...]. [They] gave only Christian names. As God commands, as they say (MV 616, personal communication, July 11, 2009).

¹ Old Believer funeral ceremony implies a series of religious services with the mention of the Church name of the deceased. If a person has not been baptized, then the service for the repose of person’s soul is conducted anonymously (Kačāne et al., 2023).

² Though the Russian word *pop* is traditionally used to designate the Orthodox priest, Old Believers of Latgale started to use it in the Soviet period; it is a testimony to the fact that as a result of Soviet atheistic propaganda the differences between designations of priests belonging to different denominations gradually disappeared.

[T]he *pop* gave the name. Whichever he would give. I have a name which [in church books] was on the day of my birth [...]. So, you see, for me, it was just as God had written, such a name (MV 341, personal communication, June 27, 2006).

Having been given a name, the “nonperson” turned “into an individual” and assumed “both a civil and a religious identity” (Kennedy Neville, 1994, p. 16). It is worth mentioning that in everyday communication with people who did not belong to the community of Old Believers, Christian names were concealed and replaced with the person’s official name, used in passports and other documents, which everyone was allowed to know. As one interviewee said, “Actually, I was christened Nicka, but by passport, I am Dominicka” (MV 457, personal communication, June 29, 2007).

The second important function of the baptismal ritual for the Old Believers community in Latvia – which is based on the strict order of patriarchal life – is that it confirms that the son or daughter’s belonging to their father and the father’s kin: “This is a tradition established ages ago: to baptize children in their father’s religion” (Koroljova, 2020, p. 341). This belonging is emphasized during the christening ceremony by using items that belong to the father – most often a shirt, either new or already worn:

I had a new shirt, not worn as yet, the *batjushka* [spiritual leader] incensed it, incensed this water, [then] the *batjushka* immersed her [daughter] three times into [the water], so she got baptized in that river (Koroljova, 2017, p. 85).

A new-born child was wrapped up in the father’s shirt, taken off just on the spot, so that the child would be healthy, would not cry and the father would be good to him (Koroljova, 2020, p. 520).

The baptism ritual places special responsibilities on the godfather of the child, who participates in a christening ceremony not only physically, performing certain activities required by the ritual, but also financially, paying for the spiritual leader for the ceremony either by himself or sharing the cost with the godmother: “there is a real father and *otec-krjostnik* [father-godfather], called dad, his duty is to carry water and fill the font with it” (Koroljova, 2017, p. 83); “godparents paid for everything: such was godparents’ duty” (Koroljova, 2020, pp. 393–394).

The duties of *otec-krjostnik* could also be carried out by any Old Believer who was not related for example, somebody who worked in a prayer house or a spiritual leader himself, if a suitable candidate was not available. Such a situation could arise and was quite common in Latgale during the post-war period:

I was baptized at the age of, perhaps, I was two months old, in November [1947], most likely [I was not] two months old yet, [...] in an [urban] prayer house. My godmother was [name given]. Who my godfather was I don’t know, since we didn’t find [him]. Most probably it was one of the workers of the prayer house; [it might have been] the *pop* himself or somebody else, since everything is allowed in our [community] (MV 1076, personal communication, May 23, 2016).

The Old Believers’ baptismal ritual traditionally involved the presence of a spiritual leader, who was responsible for performing the ceremony according to the canons. Knowledge of baptism was obligatory for any spiritual leader, as indicated by the proverb used among Latgalian Old Believers: “If you don’t know how to baptize a child, don’t put the *sarafan*³ on” (Koroljova, 2020, p. 514). The baptismal font, or *kupelj*,⁴ must not have been used for other purposes before, as it was considered special. As one informant published by Koroljova recalled, “[We need] a barrel which mustn’t have been used before” (Koroljova, 2017, p. 213). A natural water source – such as a pond or a lake – could also serve as an analogue for a barrel or *kupelj*, since the main thing was to observe the sacral Trinity – immersing the child three times – rather than adhere to some specific way of getting the water:

[Hold] under the arms and immerse [the child] three times [in the water] – it is summer now, and you can [baptize a child] just in the lake (Koroljova, 2017, p. 247).

Once, my brother’s daughter and son were baptized, when [there was] no barrel, [they can] simply immerse [the child] in the pond (Koroljova, 2017, p. 447).

³ *Sarafan* – a special dress of spiritual leaders used during religious ceremonies.

⁴ The *kupelj* [baptismal font] was filled with water. While praying, the baptized person was immersed in water three times. Baptismal fonts were of varying sizes, suitable for both children and adults (Baranovskij & Potashenko, 2005). In rural areas, the ritual might be performed in a lake or a river.

Rituals performed in this way invite parallels with Jesus Christ's christening in the waters of the River Jordan. Water used in a baptismal ceremony takes on a sacral and healing character. In an analogy for the way Jesus Christ was baptized, the child is immersed three times into waters blessed by God's hand and becomes faithful to the Father of Heaven, a fresh and healthy member of society:

And so, all the children went, and [you] would draw water from the well for the font. And imagine a two-week-old baby or whatever [was immersed] in it. One, two, three and into that same [font]. [...] And all of them survived, nothing [bad] happened, everything was taken away as with a touch, you understand. And there [in the font], water is divine, [the spiritual leader] would scent everything with incense, would do everything, and there was something [about it] you understand that's it (MV 831, personal communication, January 27, 2011).

As this quotation shows, to perform the ritual of baptism according to Old Believer tradition, dripping water on the child or "anointing" him with water is not enough: the whole child, including their head, must be immersed. This was stated by many interviewees:

this is an old and just religion, because Jesus Christ was christened in the river of Jordan. [...]. And, and we all are baptized in the water, and [...] if [a child] were anointed, sprinkled, that is not christening (MV 712, personal communication, July 5–6, 2010).

[We] took [the child] to the prayer house and there was a big font there, we immersed him in cold water [...]. And [we] wrapped [him] up, we prayed before icons, [he] was held by a godfather, godmother, his mother and father [...] (MV 616, personal communication, July 11, 2009).

In this regard, traditional Old Believer baptisms are based on the Holy Scripture and aimed at preserving the ancestral Christian ritual. Until 1940, all religious denominations in Latvia, including religious minorities, had favourable conditions for expressing and reaffirming their belief systems.

3.2 Transformation: Old Believer Baptismal Act Initiation under Soviet Occupation

According to scholars of religious studies, "every epoch, region and state, every religion and denomination had their own model of the state and Church relations and their own experience" (Runce, 2012, p. 102). The long period of Soviet power in Latvia (1940–1941 then 1944/45–1990) had a destructive impact on mundane life and holidays, including diverse traditions and rituals, especially, national and religious ones. The new Soviet spirituality denied any traditional religiosity and offered new communistic values that contradicted the previously existing social order (Krūmiņa-Konkova, 2021). Under the impact of atheistic and anti-religious propaganda on a national level, a "negative and denying attitude [...] towards any Church or religion and its institutions" (Runce, 2012, p. 107) was promoted at that time. The Church, which was connected to the state in the interwar period and brutally separated from the state under the Soviets, was used for mercantilism, favourable only for the Soviet power. Its purpose was to control and spiritually equalize the local population, thus making them mere puppets of State power (Runce, 2012; Sister Euphrosyne, 2017). In the late 1950s, secular equivalents were developed for baptism (as well as marriage and funeral rites) (Bercken, 1989). In the 1960s, "an attempt was made to substitute the traditional baptism with a new-type ritual called [the] Childhood Festival", which was held once a year and involved a large number of children (Paukštytė-Šaknienė, 2007, pp. 117–118).

The life stories and interviews examined confirm that the Soviets power's persistent emphasis on values which fit their ideology, its cult of anti-religiousness, and its deliberate attempts to undermine religious traditions were not entirely successful, since annihilating values that have existed for centuries is not an easy task. "There is often a striking parallel between new ideological and old church rituals, hence the artificiality of the former. The fundamental difference is that the new rituals are deliberate creations of party and government, they did not arise out of emotional involvement of the people with the ideology" (Bercken, 1989, p. 40).

During World War II, in the post-war period and up to the beginning of the 1960s, "when the scientific-atheistic propaganda was increased, Old Believer parishes were possibly in a better situation than congregations of other denominations – especially Catholic and Lutheran congregations, whose loyalty was questioned by the Soviet power" (Pazuhina, 2012, p. 237) and who were treated as agents of the Western Block. However, Latvian Old Believers' religious activities were also restricted by the Soviet authorities, resulting in a crisis of cultural life in the 1950s–1970s (Podmazovs, 2001, p. 147). Despite the political conditions and propaganda in Latvian periodicals – where local Old Believers' rituals and customs were presented as "religious deceptions", "uncultured" and "spiritual darkness" (Jevlanovs, 1961, p. 4) – the need for rites of transition, especially traditional religious baptism, on the whole was not questioned among Old Believers. "It was Old

Believers' deep respect for religious rituals, performed and preserved as family traditions from generation to generation, that made the existence of the community necessary – although the propaganda of atheism gained in intensity, baptismal and funeral rituals were still performed, especially in the countryside" (Pazuhina, 2012, pp. 238–239). This is also confirmed by the current study: "The child was baptized; all [of us] prayed to God as we had always prayed" (MV 804, personal communication, June 3, 2010).

The stability of the baptismal rite among Old Believers was supported by the conviction that an unbaptized man was destined to live his life in sin: "My son was baptized; after he was baptized, whatever you do – everything appears to be a sin. Then, we cannot live in this world, [everything is] a sin and a sin!" (Koroljova, 2020, p. 190).

As the life stories reveal, even Soviet political leaders and educationalists who publicly fought against religiosity baptized their children in private according to the canons of the Old Belief:

my aunt told me, she lived in Riga her whole life, that very big bosses, such bosses baptized their children. [...] [They] only pretended, you see, that [they did] not [...] (MV 712, personal communication, July 5–6, 2010).

I was already a communist, and such a socially active person [...] and a [factory] chairman and [worked] at the factory, but all the same [...] all my children are baptized (MV 831, personal communication, January 27, 2011).

[My children were] baptized, and my grandchildren were baptized and that's it (female interviewee who worked as chief cashier in a post office and was a Communist during the Soviet era) (MV 758, personal communication, July 7, 2010).

Atheists – those believing in the non-existence of God, a viewpoint supported by the Soviet power – were of a different opinion. However, atheist Old Believers were few in number in Soviet Latvia:

No, not a single child is baptized. I was an atheist, my wife [was] also the same, my wife's parents and my parents did not create obstacles to this. And until today my children [have not been christened]. They themselves may choose between Judaism, Islam or Christianity [...] (MV 1048, personal communication, November 24, 2013).

The increased risk (espionage, public humiliation, discrimination in one's professional field, and possible administrative punishments up to and including legal ones) in the Soviet period influenced attitudes and models of behaviour amongst religious believers, forcing people to find alternative ways to organize, perform and/or participate in religious rituals: "The Soviet occupation power divided people's existence and daily life into two zones, destroying the psychological integrity: the public (regime-neutral or loyal) and the private (hidden and illegal)" (Runce, 2021, p. 263).

The interviewees underline the fact that in the Soviet period clergymen had to be very careful, since any rites of transition (baptism, wedding or funeral) performed by them could be their last one in this status if this fact became known to the representatives of the official power:

But during the Soviet time, [they] were in general afraid, *pops* then in general. [...] [all the rituals were performed] on the quiet. [...] In the Soviet Union [they] did not believe in any of the gods and therefore those *pops* were quiet (MV 1046, personal communication, November 11, 2013).

In this respect, the period of Nikita Khrushchev's leadership (1957–1964) represented an especially dramatic period in Latvia's history. The mechanisms of internal espionage were used to their full extent and the veto on any kind of religious activity peaked:

[they] used to come and check then, well, and when there were *Komsomols* (members of Young Communist League), then in Khrushchev's time [they] checked especially [thoroughly] (MV 831, personal communication, January 27, 2011).

Due to this fear, local Old Believers did not always venture to baptize their children in prayer houses; there were only a few interviewees who were explicitly against any change in the procedure of baptism who did so: "My son was baptized in the prayer house" said one informant, speaking about the Soviet period (MV 712, personal communication, July 5–6, 2010). The interviewees' Soviet-period experiences testify to the fact that the spiritual leader could perform the baptismal rite at the home of the new-born or their relative rather than in a prayer house, as such practice was traditionally accepted. This avoided publicizing the event, which

might result in punishment not only for the performer of the ritual but also for the participants. Over time, baptism became a ritual performed not only in secret but also more privately: “You wouldn’t go to a prayer house to baptize [children], you know, the gossip about it will quickly spread and that’s all. It’s better that [no one] would have the faintest idea [about it]” (MV 794, personal communication, July 9, 2010).

During the period of atheist propaganda, Old Believers who occupied administrative and leading positions would try to conceal the fact they had organized and participated in baptismal ceremonies:

in [19]48, my nephew was also christened. And I arranged it so that I wouldn’t be caught and [nobody] would see me. If I had been caught, I would have been in trouble, of course. [...] So, we kept away from this [publicity] (MV 784, personal communication, July 8, 2010).

In turn, the ritual itself was performed *vtihomolku* or *vtihorja* (on the quiet), with few participants present to avoid unwelcome witnesses:

In the time of Ulmanis,⁵ [children] were baptized, under the Germans [Nazi occupation; 1941–1944/5] and in the time of Soviets [children] were not baptized, unless only on the quiet (Koroljova, 2017, p. 471).

[Children] were baptized secretly – all my children are baptized (Koroljova, 2017, p. 470).

All were baptized, well... on the quiet, you see (MV 831, personal communication, January 27, 2011).

we baptized [children] secretly. We were simple [people], [...] but as my sons worked, I baptized [them] secretly. And I asked the *pop* not to write it down [i.e. not to register it] (MV 209, personal communication, July 1, 2004).

With the strengthening of the Sovietization of Latvia, geographical factors played an important role, and the binary opposition between centre and periphery became evident. In cities and larger rural centres, control was stricter and there was a greater chance of being punished. In the rural environment, particularly in smaller and more remote places, religious rituals could be performed unnoticed as local eyewitnesses would keep silent about it. This is confirmed by both scholars of the Latvian Old Belief (Pazuhina, 2012) and respondents:

my aunt lives some seven kilometres away from Preiļi [a town in Latgale region], and there is Shiripovka village. She is such a pious [woman], and there, to that place, children were taken, the spiritual leader came, and [children] were baptized there (MV 794, personal communication, July 9, 2010).

My children were baptized [...] in Moskvini prayer house. My son was baptized in Moskvini prayer house by a *pop*. This took place in [19]61 (MV 712, personal communication, July 5–6, 2010).

It is noteworthy that at that time inhabitants of neighbouring Soviet republics also had their children baptized in rural parishes. For instance, Belarus had faced Soviet control over religion for decades, but the majority of Belarussian Old Believers continued to maintain their faith in private and took advantage of their proximity to neighbouring republics (Latvian and Lithuanian SSRs) to attend religious ceremonies and have their family members baptized (Harbatski, 2019).

To my father [he was a spiritual leader], it was just in summer and I was there on my holidays, a baby from Minsk was brought for baptizing [200 km away]. [...] Well, most possibly to conceal this matter from Soviet authorities (MV 782, personal communication, July 8, 2010).

Although, as with other denominations, Old Believers’ belief and their ability to withstand external pressure under forced Soviet secularization were tested, a proportion continued to follow their ancestral religious traditions. Old Believers had to come to terms with their inability to strictly follow the traditional rite of baptism that was once conducted in a prayer house in the presence of the community. The very need for a baptism prompted them to rethink and modify the ceremony so as not to endanger both participants and those being baptized.

⁵ Kārlis Ulmanis – President and Prime Minister of Latvia (1934–1940). On May 15, 1934, K. Ulmanis organized a coup d’état and initiated a period of authoritarian rule in Latvia (Sils, 2023).

4. CONCLUSION

For centuries, the Old Believer community in Latvia have tried to preserve their value system, beliefs and traditions, including under Soviet occupation. Baptism – a “socially crucial ceremony” (Kennedy Neville, 1994, p. 20) which remains a carrier of specific religious, social and cultural information – was one of the rites people safeguarded during the unfavourable conditions of secularization implemented by Soviet power. The life experiences of witnesses of those times demonstrate that, despite many limitations on its practice, baptism continued to carry huge significance among Old Believers in Latvia. The majority continued to baptize their children; however, due to the influence of Soviet anti-religionism, the rite was often performed in secret at home or in prayer houses located in rural territories and only in the presence of a small number of trusted people. Thus, baptism became a ceremony for an individual family rather than the community. Opposing the official position of the Soviet authorities and potentially endangering themselves and their relatives – as well as the clergymen who conducted the ceremony – the Old Believer community continued to remain faithful to religious traditions and the foundations of any Christian denomination – baptism. By preserving the ancient form of the baptismal ceremony – water immersion – the rite contributed to the continuity of ancestral tradition and self-identification processes, ensuring a sense of belonging. This allows us to conclude that the change of socio-political system did not transform the rite of baptism itself (that is, the sequence of ritual actions and attributes used in the ritual were preserved), but it did change the ways the rite was organized and conducted. This transformation included changes to the status of the religious events (from public to private), the choice of space (prioritizing private homes or remote), and the number of participants (usually just immediate family members present).

After the restoration of Latvia's independence and religious freedom, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion was once again reaffirmed by the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (1922). This encouraged many Old Believers to revive their ancestral roots and restore religious life in small communities on the verge of decline.

Future research by the authors will include a comparative analysis of Latvian Old Believer rites of transition (baptism – wedding – funeral) and their transformation under the impact of Soviet secularisation.

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