



Byzantine Icons Wrought in Metal

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Small icons, some of metal, were made especially by the Old Believers or Stavrophors, a sect that appeared in Russia in the seventeenth century. Its representatives split from the Orthodox Church in 1666 over variations to Christian rituals that had been performed for centuries.¹The event that created the religious sect known as ‘the Old Believer’ in Russia was triggered by some changes made by Patriarch Nikon of Moscow between 1652 and 1666. Those led to a rupture with the ancient Russian traditions; some of these refer to icons.²In the period mentioned, Russian society was split into two camps: the supporters of the reforms, ‘Nikonians’, and their opponents, the Old Believers. The ‘Old Belief’ was the largest opposition movement to emerge in Russia before 1905.

What are the events that led to this move? By the middle of the seventeenth century Greek and Russian Church officials, including Patriarch Nikon of Moscow, had noticed discrepancies between contemporary to them Russian and Greek books used during religious services and hence between rituals based on them. These unrevised Muscovite service-books were derived from an older Greek recension. The notables mentioned above reached the conclusion that the Russian Orthodox Church had, as a result of errors in copying, developed rites and liturgical books of its own that had significantly deviated from the Greek originals. Thus, the Russian Orthodox Church had become dissonant with the other Orthodox churches.

Nikon could not accept the existence of two different rites in the same Church and intended to carry out measures towards the unification of the religious practices within the entire Russian stardom, including within the lands that constitute now Ukraine and Belarus, which were populated by Slavs, and at that time were part of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The rite of the latter was closer to the Greek than was within the Muscovite territories and the Patriarch wanted to bring back into the fold Orthodox rebels from those territories.

Supported by Tsar Aleksei (on the throne in 1645-1676), Nikon carried out some preliminary liturgical reforms. In 1652, he convened a synod and discussed with the bishops about the need to compare Russian *Typikon*, *Euchologion* and other liturgical books with their Greek counterparts. Monasteries from all over Russia received requests to send copies to Moscow in order to have them subjected to a comparative analysis. Given the complex development of the Russian liturgical texts in the previous centuries and the lack of systematic records concerning them, such a task would have taken many years of thorough research.

Without waiting for the conclusion of that scholarly exercise, Nikon annulled the decree of the Stoglav Synod of 1551 regarding the Eucharistic service. [The latter gathering was held by Metropolitan Macarius (1482-1563; in service between 1542 and 1563) with the participation of Tsar Ivan IV/the Terrible (1530-1584; reigned 1547- 15843). Nikon ordered the printing of new editions of the Russian Psalter and Missal, as well as of a pamphlet in which he justified the liturgical modifications he wanted. These two new books made official the change of the most frequently used words and visible gestures in the liturgy; that included the manner in which Christ’s name was supposed to be pronounced and the sigh of the cross done during prayers. The authoritarian manner in

¹Diarmid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, Penguin 2009, 2010, chapter 15, pp. 503-537, especially pp. 539-541, 543; see also Paul Meyendorff, *Russia- Ritual and Reform: The Liturgical Reforms of Nikon in the 17th Century*, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1991.

² For changes referring to icons that were effected due to Patriarch Nikon’s intervention, see my article “Late developments in Meta-Byzantine icon-painting. Trends in the first half of the twentieth century and their roots in the Russian post-Byzantine Middle Ages”, in *East-West Review*, vol.16, no. 3, Issue 45 (2017), pp. 17–21.

³ The Stoglav Synod is also known as the Council of the Hundred Chapters; representatives of the Duma (the Parliament of the Boyars) also attended.

which he forced the changes through turned Avvakum and others of the Dogmatists of piety against him. Their protests led to their excommunication and exile and, in some cases, imprisonment or execution.

The reformers did not dispute that the Russian texts should be corrected by reference to the most ancient Greek and Slavonic manuscripts, although they also considered that many traditional Russian ceremonial practices were acceptable and should be kept or revived. But the hastily-published new editions of the service books contained internal inconsistencies, and had to be reprinted several times in quick succession. Rather than being revised according to the above-mentioned ancient manuscripts, the new liturgical editions had actually been translated from modern Greek editions printed in a Catholic environment (in Venice).⁴

Nikon also considered some Russian Church rituals as erroneous when being compared with their contemporary Greek equivalents, and here he differed from Patriarch Paisios of Jerusalem, who suggested that differences in ritual do not in themselves indicate error; the latter accepted the possibility that over time some variances occur. He urged Nikon to use discretion in attempting to enforce complete uniformity with Greek practice.

Nevertheless, both Nikon and the tsar wished to carry out their reforms, although their endeavours may have had as much or more political motivation as they had a religious one. Several authors on this subject point out that Tsar Aleksei, encouraged by his military success in the Russo-Polish War (1654–1667) to conquer West Russian provinces and Ukraine, developed ambitions of becoming the liberator of the Orthodox areas which at that time formed part of the Ottoman Empire.⁵ The same authors also mention the role of the Near-East patriarchs, who actively supported the idea of the Russian Tsar becoming the liberator of all Orthodox Christians and who suggested that Patriarch Nikon might become the new Patriarch of Constantinople.

We close this article by indicating the main differences between some elements of the Old Believers religious ritual and the corresponding one within the mainstream Orthodoxy. These are as follows: the Old Believers only recognize saints which were canonized before the Schism, although they do have their own saints, such as Archpriest Avvakum and Boyarynya Morozova. When making the sign of the Cross, the representatives of this sect use two fingers – the straight indexfinger and the slightly bent middle finger (and with the thumb closed over the remaining, folded digits); while the rest of the Orthodox people do it with three fingers touching at their tips; one of them being the thumb.

Old Ritualists generally say the so-called Jesus's prayer⁶ with the sign of the cross, while mainstream Orthodox, including the New Ritualists in Russia) use the sign of the cross as a Trinitarian symbol. This makes for a significant difference between the two branches of Russian Orthodoxy, and one of the most noticeable. The Stavroforos (an other name given to the Old Believers), in agreement with most of the other Orthodox, only recognize the baptism performed through three full immersions. It means that they do not consider valid this act achieved through the pouring or sprinkling of water as the Russian Orthodox Church has occasionally accepted since the eighteenth century; the Old Believers call people who practice the ritual of baptism through pouring or sprinkling *Oblivantsy*. During the Liturgy the priests belonging to the Old Believers use seven *prosphora* instead of five as is the practice in the new-rite Russian Orthodoxy or instead of a single large *prosphoron*, as it sometimes done by the Greeks and Arabs. The Old Believers chant the 'Alleluia!' verse after the psalmody twice rather than the three times as made compulsory by the Nikonian reforms. They do not use polyphonic singing as is the practice in the new-style Russian, but only the monodic, unison singing of Znamenny chant. In this respect it represents a tradition that parallels the use of Byzantine Church singing and neumatic notation.

Because, as mentioned at the outset of the article, the Old Believers use the icons in a very intimate way – they pray with them in their hands – the size of these objects of cult needed to be adapted to the purpose.

⁴Paul Meyendorff, *Russia, Ritual and Reform: The Liturgical Reforms of Nikon in the 17th Century*, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991, pp. 45, 53-55.

⁵For instance, Robert I. Frost, *The Northern Wars. War, State and Society in North-eastern Europe 1558–1721*, London: Longman, 2000, and A. V. Malov, *Russo-Polish War (1654–1667)*, Moscow: Exprint, 2006.

⁶Jesus's prayer consists in the repetition of the expression 'Lord Have mercy!'.

I met an iconographer in the UK who makes metallic icons; his name is Aleksander Aleksandar. Below, in figs. 1 and 2 there is a reproduction of two exemplars wrought by him in metal and enamel; most of those used by the Stavrophors are painted on wood.



Fig 1. An icon of St.. Georgewrought in metal and enamel by Aleksander Aleksandar



Fig 2. An icon of Vissarion/Visarionwrought in metal and enamel by Aleksander Aleksandar

Today, there are some representatives of Stavrophors living not only in Russia, but also in the neighbouring countries, for instance in the Romanian Danube Delta – these are known as Lipovani.⁷ Among the Old Believers that fled overseas some still exists in Alaska and in territories as far as South America. In Russia itself the Old Believers have a spiritual centre in Moscow that is called Rogozhsky. They also have Pokrovsky Cathedral (RPSC) built in 1792, and Uspensky Cathedral in Belaya Krinitsa, constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Recently, the Russian government, under a programme that intends to bring them back, has been offering them free land in Siberia.

⁷This are the Lipovans and they belong to what is called Lipovan Orthodox Old-Rite Church (Belokrinitskaya Hierarchy). These descendants of the Old Believers left Russia around 1740.

As I emphasized in my book *Between Tradition and Modernity*,⁸ despite the fact that since the seventeenth century, when the Western style of painting reached Russia, but especially from the eighteenth and subsequent centuries on (until today), many styles co-exist in the iconography of Byzantine heritage around the World. The traditional style, close to that displayed by icons painted in Byzantium, is still practiced, and this is what the Stavrophors perpetuate.

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⁸ Elena Ene D-Vasilescu, *Between Tradition and Modernity. Icons and Icon-painters in Romania*, VDM Verlag, Saarbrücken, 2009.