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Old Believers and the World of Evil: Images of Evil Forces in Old Believer Art

I stood vigilant: and lo, two men in white robes lead to me a naked man – whole body malodorous and greatly disgusting, breathes fire, a noisome flame comes out of the mouth, nostrils and ears. Behind him walks our Tsar and the rulers, and a crowd of people.

Avvakum, *Eighth Homily*¹

Old Ritualism – a religious movement that arose within the Moscow Patriarchate in the mid-17th century – began with a schism which resulted from reforms initiated by Patriarch Nikon.² A huge majority of the faithful felt that Nikon's actions were blasphemous and an insult to tradition.³ Those who rejected the new customs, seeking to preserve the old rite, were persecuted by both the Orthodox Church and the state.⁴ The Old Believers were, and still are, extremely conservative in both doctrine and morality, including their beliefs on the proper forms of art and aesthetic tastes. Their collective convictions continue to stem from the Old Russian traditions that they have preserved mostly intact and unchanged and which they perceive as fundamental to their group's survival. Although Old Ritualism is not a unified movement and has split several times in its history, its constitutive parts are united by great esteem for the Old Russian tradition and by a negative attitude towards official state and Church institutions, which Old Believers consider to be in Antichrist's thrall.⁵ Persecuted and rejected, followers of the "old Orthodoxy" began

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- 1 All passages from Avvakum translated from Polish per *Żywot protopopu Awwakuma przez niego samego nakreślony i wybór innych pism* [The life of Protopope Avvakum written by himself and a selection of other writings], translated and provided with a foreword and commentary by W. Jakubowski, Wrocław–Warsaw–Cracow–Gdańsk 1972, p. 265.
 - 2 С. Зеньковский, *Русское старообрядчество. Духовные движения семнадцатого века*, Москва 1995, pp. 185–257.
 - 3 E. Przybył, *W cieniu Antychrysta. Idee staroobrzędowców w XVII w.* [In the shadow of the Antichrist. Old Believer ideas in the 17th century], Cracow 1999, p. 84.
 - 4 See Зеньковский, op. cit., pp. 258–339.
 - 5 O. Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion. Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, translated and edited by R. Milner-Gulland, London 2002, p. 144; *Старообрядчество. Лица, события, предметы и символы. Опыт*

to see everything that was novel and reformist as a sign of evil and a manifestation of Antichrist in the world, thus adopting a negative attitude not only towards matters essential to the Old Russian tradition but also towards trivial (or seemingly trivial) issues of morality, such as the use of samovars, which many northern followers saw as a part of Antichrist's domain.⁶

Considering how important all matters tied to eschatology, Antichrist and the relationship between good and evil were to the Old Believer culture, I have sought to examine here the links between Old Believer literature, philosophy and art. I shall thus attempt to determine whether the artistic traditions of the followers of the "old Orthodoxy" may be interpreted simply as a part of the common East Christian legacy or whether they are a clear manifestation of a unique attitude towards the world. I shall also review the significance of evil in Old Believer art, which – as I will demonstrate – has been one of the most crucial themes of Old Believer literature.

One of the most important sources for all Old Believer communities was the Revelation to John.⁷ The text was commonly known and featured widely in Old Believer writing collections. Many communities, such as the Vyg Community in north-western Russia, owned numerous copies of the Apocalypse.⁸ The version of the text that was most frequently available in the vicinity of the Urals and Siberia in the 18th and 19th centuries contained, apart from the main text, a commentary by Andreas of Caesarea. Many Old Believer groups relied on various annotated versions of John the Theologian's work; the most popular was the so-called *Апокалипсис трехтолковый*, which included three separate commentaries.⁹ This was the text to which the greatest thinkers of Old Ritualism referred in their writings. Judging by how widespread it was, the Apocalypse was frequently and commonly read by the Old Believers. It may also be assumed that its text was read in the light of the current events and as a prediction.

Aside from the Revelation to John, the Old Believers valued many other patristic eschatological works, such as *The Apostle*, *The Chrysostom* or *Admonitions* by

энциклопедического словаря, Москва 1996, pp. 29–30; see also R. O. Crummey, *Old Believers and the World of Antichrist: Vyg Community and the Russian State, 1694–1855*, Madison 1970, passim.

6 В. В. Власова, "Эсхатологические представления коми староверов", *Арт*, 2004, no. 4, p. 136.

7 Ф. И. Буслаев, *Свод изображений из лицевых Апокалипсисов по Русским рукописям с XVI-го века по XIX-ый*, Москва, 1884, p. 197; Z. Jaroszewicz-Pierśławcew, "Tekstowe i plastyczne wizje czasu Apokalipsy w piśmiennictwie starowierców" [Textual and visual images of the time of Apocalypse in Old Believer writings], in: *Czas Apokalipsy. Wizje dni ostatecznych w kulturze europejskiej od starożytności do wieku XVII* [The time of the Apocalypse. Visions of the judgment days in European culture from antiquity to the 17th century], ed. K. Zalewska-Lorkiewicz, Warsaw 2013, p. 120.

8 Е. М. Юхименко, *Выговская старообрядческая пустынь: духовная жизнь и литература*, vol. 2, Москва 2002, pp. 364–412; cf. В. В. Керов, "Эсхатология старообрядчества конца XVII – первой половины XVIII в. и новая хозяйственная этика старой веры", in: *Старообрядчество в России (XVII–XX вв.)*, вып. 3, отв. ред. и сост. Е. М. Юхименко, Москва 2004, p. 414.

9 Ibid., p. 416.

Ephraim the Syrian.¹⁰ Also popular were later texts, particularly those published in the 17th century, such as the *Book of Cyril* (1644) or *Book on Faith* (1648),¹¹ and even in the early 18th century, such as the *Book on Antichrist* (1707).¹² Some groups of the Old Believers perceived several of the above texts, e.g. the *Book on Faith*, as equal to the *Annotated Apocalypse*.¹³ The last chapter of the *Pomorian Answers* (1723) attests to the importance attached by the Old Believers to the subject of the Antichrist's rule over the world – and to the heated debates it stirred.¹⁴

Numerous texts authored within this group expressed the belief that the world the faithful found themselves in had become hostile and alien. In this world, good was replaced by evil, the true (i.e. Orthodox) faith was overturned by blasphemy and mockery of holy rites, and the Antichrist was felt to preside over all of this.¹⁵ The first Old Believers proclaimed that Patriarch Nikon, who had introduced the Orthodox Church reforms, was the Antichrist incarnate. Many followers, however, considered the patriarch only a harbinger; much as in several other matters, the “old Orthodox” differed on the issue of who the Antichrist was, or was to be, as well as whether he already reigned on earth or was he only about to take power – and if so, when. Some thought that this period in time was still to come and waited for the Antichrist's future dominion; others believed he would not assume a physical form at all and was, instead, a spiritual construct; thus, being incorporeal, he was able to rule over the entire world.¹⁶

Many Old Believers proclaimed the year 1666 as the definite beginning of the Antichrist's reign.¹⁷ The *Zhalobnitsa* (“Book of Grief”, 1691, Solovetsky Monastery) states that it was then that “in the tsar's city of the Great Russian state there was a deviation from the piety of the fathers of the Orthodox faith”, and “consumed with anger, vile Patriarch Nikon turned into a wolfish creature and raging against the flock of Christ's sheep scattered it around the mountains and earthly

10 Jaroszewicz-Pieresławcew, op. cit., p. 120.

11 Н. С. Гурьянова, „Книга о вере” в системе авторитетов старообрядчества, in: *Старообрядчество в России*, Москва 2003, pp. 205–223; Jaroszewicz-Pieresławcew, op. cit., p. 120; cf. Р. С. Гранин, “Эсхатологические представления в Русской религиозно-философской традиции: от апокалиптики к утопизму (часть 1)”, *Пространство и время*, 2016, nos. 3–4, p. 153.

12 Н. С. Гурьянова, “К вопросу о складывании системы авторитетов старообрядчества”, in: *Проблемы истории, русской книжности, культуры и общественного сознания. Сборник научных трудов*, ред. Е. К. Ромодановская, Новосибирск 2000, pp. 16–17.

13 Cf. Гурьянова, „Книга о вере”, pp. 208–209.

14 *Поморские ответы*, Москва (Типография П. П. Рябушинского), 1911, Answer 106.

15 U. Cierniak, “Apokalipsa rosyjskich staroobrzędowców” [The Russian Old Believer Apocalypse], in: *Apokalipsa. Symbolika – tradycja – egzegeza*, I, eds. K. Korotkich, J. Ławski, Białystok 2006, pp. 71–98.

16 Н. Д. Зольникова, “Стихотворение о всеядцах” (Памятник старообрядческой полемики), in: *Проблемы истории, русской книжности, культуры и общественного сознания*, Новосибирск 2000, pp. 42–51.

17 See Cierniak, op. cit., pp. 83–84; Гранин, op. cit., p. 153; Przybył, op. cit., pp. 85–86.

chasms".¹⁸ Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich was another putative incarnation of the Antichrist, although it has to be emphasised that many first-generation Old Believers, including Protopope Avvakum, the most important leader of his time, for many years remained convinced that the tsar knew nothing of the injustices and oppression the Old Believers had to suffer, as he himself had been tricked by the wicked Nikon. Later, however, the myth of the benevolent tsar faded away. Peter I, who was exceptionally unpopular among the believers, was quite unequivocally identified as the Antichrist.¹⁹ One of the Old Believer spiritual poems encapsulates the common perception regarding that monarch: "For Antichrist won in the world now, he wants to destroy the holy faith everywhere, he wants to build a false Church. He orders all to shave their beards, forces all to make the sign of the cross with the pinch – he wants to uproot the true faith, my faith".²⁰

Similar descriptions were bestowed upon foreign rulers who left their mark on Russian history, such as Napoleon, or modern Russian leaders, such as Lenin or Stalin, and, more recently, Mikhail Gorbachev.²¹ It may therefore be assumed that a leader whose rule brought change to the existing order or some kind of reform was usually viewed as the Antichrist. Another of the Antichrist's "faces" was that of the ruler who brought death and suffering to the believers. Many Old Believers assumed that their archenemy was not a single person but a disjointed entity of many forms that acted through many rulers (and non-rulers) and reigned across the entire world.²² The words of Avvakum were valid to the Old Believers regardless of the period they lived in: "Satan pleaded with God for bright Russia so that he might redden it with the blood of the martyrs. Good thinking, devil; and for us it is pleasant to suffer for our beloved Christ".²³ The protopope called earthly life "accursed" and "dark", and his writings describe earth as a place where his homeless

18 „Жалобница” поморских старцев против самосжжений (1691), in: *Памятники старообрядческой письменности*, Санкт-Петербург 2000, pp. 152–153.

19 B. Uspienski, *Raskol i konflikti kulturowy XVII w.* [The raskol and the 17th-century cultural conflict], in: B. Uspienski, *Religia i semiotyka* [Religion and semiotics], translated by B. Żyłko, Gdańsk 2001, pp. 80–81; cf. N. V. Riasanovsky, *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*, New York–Oxford 1992, pp. 78–80.

20 *Pieśń o niebieskiej księdze. Antologia rosyjskiej ludowej poezji religijnej* [The song of heavenly book. Anthology of religious folk poetry of Russia], selected and translated by R. Łużny, Warsaw 1990, p. 266.

21 Е. А. Агеева, „Век минувший и век нынешний в эпистолиях старообрядческих писателей Я. Е. Ларина и А. К. Килина”, in: *Skupiska staroobrzędowców w Europie, Azji i Ameryce: ich miejsce i tradycje we współczesnym świecie* [Old Believer centres in Europe, Asia and America; their place and traditions in the contemporary world], eds. I. Grek-Pabisowa, I. Maryniakowa, R. Morris, Warsaw 1994, p. 79; *Старообрядчество. Лица, предметы, события и символы...*, pp. 29–30; Jaroszewicz-Pieriesławcew, op. cit., p. 122; cf. Власова, op. cit., 138.

22 Cf. Cierniak, op. cit., pp. 96–97; Гурьянова, „Книга о вере”..., pp. 211–212.

23 *Żywot protopopra Awwakuma...*, p. 193.

and excommunicated remains will be laid to rest.²⁴ He preached that the purpose of the faithful is death and only in it may they find solace.²⁵

Many Old Believer communities were convinced that they were living in the last times, just before all history would come to a close.²⁶ For that reason, some of them chose to flee from the world, or even commit suicide, to end their tormented earthly existence. In the *Tale of Those Who Suffered Torture in Russia for Old Church Pious Traditions*, Avvakum wrote: "There are those devoted defenders of the tradition, who, understanding the evil of the schism, gather with their wives and children in their cabins and, so as not to perish pitifully in their spirits, burn themselves voluntarily in a fire. A fortunate choice in the Lord!"²⁷ Self-immolations took place all across Russia – in Siberia, Pomoria and in the Novgorod, Pskov and Olonets regions. Hundreds and even thousands of believers set themselves on fire.²⁸ According to the *Zhalobniisa* of the Pomeranian elders, which features passages against self-immolation, the reason behind many of the Old Believer mass suicides was that "the present time belongs to Antichrist" and that it was "better to kill oneself than to be tortured to death by oppressors".²⁹ The faithful often burnt themselves in prayer houses where icons were kept, and images destroyed in this manner were considered "ascended", i.e. taken to heaven.³⁰

For the Old Believers, earth was a place of the greatest sorrow and alienation. To them, the entire point of imitating Christ was to negate the corporeal dimension of existence, to deprive it of "earthly nourishment", a place or any support. "The world loves its own and persecutes those of Christ. And devil is the ruler of the world", preached Avvakum.³¹ The question is whether those sombre thoughts and the expectation of the end of times, which were so typical of Old Believer attitudes, were reflected in their art. To answer this question we must first specify what Old Believer art is. I attempted to define this phenomenon in my article *Two Marian icons from the National Museum in Warsaw collection (Dwie ikony maryjne z kolekcji Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie)*, which was published in *Ikonotheka* over ten years ago. I wrote that the mid-17th-century debates over rites and ceremony had a large impact on icon painting both then and later. Works associated with the Old Believers are considered intentionally archaic, consciously drawing on traditional Russian

24 Ibid., p. 305.

25 Ibid., p. 260.

26 Власова, op. cit., pp. 136, 138.

27 *Żywot protopopa Awwakuma...*, p. 259.

28 А. Т. Пашков, "Неизвестная „гарь“ 1685 года в верховьях Кокшеньги (К изучению истории старообрядческих самосожжений конца XVII века)", in: *Проблемы истории...*, op. cit., pp. 104–109; cf. Гурьянова, *К вопросу о складывании системы авторитетов...*, pp. 16–19.

29 „Жалобница” поморских старцев..., p. 156.

30 B. A. Uspienski, *Kult św. Mikołaja na Rusi* [The cult of St. Nicholas in Russia], translated by E. Janus, M. R. Mayenowa, Z. Kozłowska, Lublin 1985, p. 267.

31 *Żywot protopopa Awwakuma...*, pp. 262–263.

painting and consistently applying the historical iconographic canon.³² An analysis of icons from Old Believer workshops reveals, however, that “Old Believer icons changed greatly over the course of more than three centuries. They were created in various environments of different economic status and were meant to satisfy a demand of the faithful and therefore fit their tastes. For this reason, there are significant (...) artistic differences between the various centres, such as Vietka, Starodub, the Vladimir governorate, Ural or northern Russia”.³³ However, differences between the workshops did not destroy the communality of all works originating within the Old Believer groups, which were based mostly on their intellectual meaning, expressed by a constant set of iconographic subjects or the meaning of iconographic programmes represented by Old Believer artworks.

In terms of iconography, many pieces created in this environment fit the general Orthodox tradition. The 19th-century icon of *John the Baptist, Angel of the Desert*, now at the National Museum in Warsaw (Fig. 1), shows the saint from the waist up, turned three quarters to the left.³⁴ He has wings on his shoulders and holds a *poteiron* with Christ represented as a Child (Amnos); John is pointing to him with a finger of his right hand. Jesus is naked, with his legs drawn up and hands raised in a blessing. The saint holds an ornate scroll which reads: *Азъ видѣх и свидѣтельстввах сей агнецъ бжій въземляй грѣхи всего міра. Покаитесьа приближ...* “I have seen and I witness that lo, the Lamb of God has taken the sins of the entire world. Repent, for near [is the Kingdom]”. John the Baptist, described as the predecessor of the Saviour, but also as a prophet, a witness to the Epiphany and a champion of the human race, was one of the East’s most popular saints. He constantly appears in Old Believer icons as a part of the pantheon of saints.³⁵ The post-Byzantine variant of his depiction, which is very common in Russia, may be associated with liturgical texts calling him “an angel on earth” and “a man of heaven”. The image described here has a Eucharistic meaning as well – by pointing to Christ, John reveals the mystery of the divine sacrifice. However, the words he addresses to the faithful by means of the scroll, namely “Repent, for near is the Kingdom”, announce the Last Judgement and direct the faithful towards a spiritual way of life and mental asceticism. In this

32 A. Sulikowska-Gąska, “Dwie ikony maryjne z kolekcji Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie. Na temat pojęcia ikony staroobrzędowej” [Two Marian icons from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw. On the concept of an Old Rite Icon], *Ikonotheke*, 2005, no. 18, p. 7.

33 Ibid., p. 20.

34 A. Sulikowska, “Ikony Jana Chrzciciela w kolekcji Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie – ciało anioła, męczeńska śmierć, święte zwłoki” [Icons of St. John the Baptist in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw: the angel’s body, a martyr’s death, holy remains], *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, 2013, no. 2 (38), p. 186, Fig. 1.

35 Антонова, op. cit., Figs. 124–125, 136; Ю. Е. Горбунов, В. Г. Херсонский, *Липованская икона XVIII–XIX в.в.*, Одесса 2000, pp. 68–69, Fig. 26; Г. Г. Нечаева, *Ветковская икона*, Минск 2002, pp. 34–39; Т. Н. Нечаева, М. А. Чернов, “„Гуслицкие письма”: иконы и иконописцы”, *Антиквариат. Предметы искусства и коллекционирования*, июль–август 2012, Fig. 3; cf. *Невьянская икона*, Екатеринбург 1997, Fig. 88; *Уральская икона. Живописная, резная и литая икона XVIII – начала XX в.*, Екатеринбург 1998, cat. no. 21.

sense, the icon in question expresses the Old Believer ideology; it is also one of the works directly referencing the historical 17th-century icon painting style (which is, in fact, typical of many Old Believer works), in this case from the Volga region.³⁶



Fig. 1. *Saint John the Baptist, Angel of the Desert*, Russia, Palekh, first half of the 19th century, National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. IK 81 MNW

Another extremely popular motif in Old Believer iconography was the Archangel Michael as the Archistrategos of the Heavenly Hosts.³⁷ In an 18th-century icon from the National Museum in Warsaw (Fig. 2),³⁸ which was most likely created in northern Russia, the Archangel is shown in the centre, as a red-faced young man wearing armour and riding a fiery-winged horse. With his spear he is impaling a devil lying under the horse's hooves in a lake that almost covers the submerged towers of Babylon. Michael is holding a closed book in his left hand and in his right hand a trumpet he is blowing. A rainbow is seen between his raised arms. In his right hand he is also holding a long spear with which he is striking the devil in the lake. The fiend is a winged, animal-like creature with a fairly long pointy beard. Above the

36 В. Г. Брюсова, *Русская живопись XVII века*, Москва 1984, Tabs. 54, 68, Fig. 141; Tarasov, op. cit., pp. 322–325, Figs. 172–174.

37 See Нечаева, op. cit., pp. 155–161.

38 *Apocalisse. L'ultima rivelazione*, eds. A. Geretti, S. Castri, Ginevra Milano 2007, cat. 65; A. Sulikowska-Gąska, „Mijają lata naszego świata”. Rzeczy ostateczne w sztuce staroobrzędowców” [‘The years of our world are passing’. The ultimate things in Old Believer art], in: *Apokalipsa...*, p. 482.



Fig. 2. *Archangel Michael, Archistrategos of the Heavenly Hosts*, northern Russia, Old Believer workshop, 18th century, National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. IK 62 MNW

Archangel, within the *kovcheg*, is a handwritten inscription: *лукъ облачный послѣждь всей твари еже есть зав...* ("Clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head", Revelation 10,1, KJV), and another below the devil: *морю Возшумевшу Врагу Бску. дѣша оружіе В'конецъ игоады Разрушилъ Еси и пмать его погибѣ сшумомъ* ("Into a raging sea [he cast] the enemy, having deprived him of arms. In the end he brought down the cities too, and memory of him fell with great noise"³⁹). To the right, the Christ Child is shown sitting behind an altar upon which lies a closed book. The right-hand side *polye* reads: *престоль твои бже в' вѣке вѣка жезль правленію жезль црствіа твоего* ("Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom"; Hebrews 1,8). The upper *polye* features an inscription written in an ornamental script: *СТЫИ АРХИСТРАТИГЪ МИХАИЛЛ ГРОЗНИ СИЛ ВОЕВОДА* ("St. Michael Archistrategos, Terrible Voivode of the Forces").

³⁹ An interpretation of a passage from Psalm 9. Cf. Revelation 20,10; 20,14. See also the passage from *Interrogations of John (Interrogatio Ioannis)*, often called the Bogomilist catechism: "Satan and all of his army will be bound, and they will be cast into (...) a lake of fire," *Apokryfy Nowego Testamentu*. III. *Listy i apokalipsy chrześcijańskie. Apokryfy syryjskie* [New Testament apocrypha. III. Christian letters and apocrypha. The Syrian Apocrypha], ed. M. Starowieyski, Cracow 2001, p. 324.

Depictions of angels are frequent in Old Believer art. They often feature arch-angels, particularly the Guardian Angel (Fig. 11).⁴⁰ That last motif, usually featuring an angel dressed in white and holding a sword, may even be considered emblematic of Old Believer painting.⁴¹ However, it appears that depictions of the Archangel Michael, Archistrategos of the Heavenly Hosts, are more popular, as they appear in both icons⁴² and drawings⁴³ from all Old Believer centres. The diversity of angelic iconography is also reflected in the miniatures of the *Annotated Apocalypse*, which was frequently found in Old Believer communities, including private houses. A copy at the Polish National Library, which can be dated to the first quarter of the 19th century,⁴⁴ includes a full set of miniatures typically found in such books. The iconographic programme of such sets of illustrations is very complex; here we shall focus on only a few examples of how evil manifests itself.

The lower part of the image shown in fol. 90v (Fig. 3)⁴⁵ depicts a devil painting markings on the foreheads of people with a pen; this may be considered an illustration of Revelation 13, 16: "And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads". Above, two monsters are facing each other, their maws open; a small human figure floats from the maw of one to the other. This probably refers to an earlier passage: "And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed" (Revelation 13, 15). Displaying souls as small humanoid beings is characteristic of Old Russian iconography.⁴⁶ Within the context of the Old Believer doctrine this is a very important scene, as it touches upon an issue that recurs frequently, particularly in the *beguny* doctrine, namely the issue of people

40 G. Kobrzeniecka-Sikorska, *Ikony staroobrzędowców w zbiorach Muzeum Warmii i Mazur, Olsztyn* 1993, cat. nos. 31, 33, 35, 36, 38; Горбунов, Херсонский, op. cit., pp. 75–77; Н. В. Пивоварова, "Об одном эпизоде из истории „борьбы с расколом” в середине XIX в. Судиславские моление Н. А. Папулина и их судьба по документам Российского Государственного Исторического Архива", in: *Старообрядчество в России...*, Fig. 64, p. 371, no. 15; Tarasov, op. cit., Fig. 54.

41 М. Чернов, "Народная икона и старообрядчество", *Антиквариат. Предметы искусства и коллекционирования*, сентябрь 2011, p. 75; see Нечаева, Чернов, op. cit., passim, Fig. 58.

42 Cf. Антонова, op. cit., Fig. 116; Брюсова, op. cit., Fig. 177; Чернов, op. cit., Fig. 18; Нечаева, op. cit., p. 155–161; *Невянская икона*, Figs. 74, 95, 135, 145; *Уральская икона...*, cat. nos. 71, 106.

43 Нечаева, Чернов, op. cit., Fig. 9; *Русский рисованный лубок конца XVIII – начала XX века*, Москва 1992, cat. no. 80.

44 A. Sulikowska, "Znaki Antychrysta. Miniatury starowierskiej *Komentowanej Apokalipsy* z kolekcji Biblioteki Narodowej" [Marks of Antichrist. Miniatures in the Old Believer *Annotated Apocalypse* in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw], *Rocznik Biblioteki Narodowej*, no. 45, 2014, pp. 80–81.

45 Ibid., pp. 84, 92, Fig. IX; cf. *Sztuka iluminacji i grafiki cerkiewnej. Katalog wystawy, październik – listopad 1996, Biblioteka Narodowa* [The art of Orthodox illumination and graphics. Catalogue of the exhibition, Oct. – Nov. 1996, National Library], Warsaw 1996, Fig. 47.

46 See A. Sulikowska, *Ciała, groby i ikony. Kult świętych w ruskiej tradycji literackiej i ikonograficznej* [Bodies, graves and icons. The cult of saints in the Old Russian literary and iconographic tradition], Warsaw 2013, pp. 274–283.



Fig. 3. Marks and Number of the Beast: 666. Miniature from the *Annotated Apocalypse*, Russia, early 19th century, fol. 90v., National Library in Warsaw, Akc. 12372



Fig. 4. Vision of an Angel Preaching the Teachings on the Beast and Condemning Those Who Serve It. Miniature from the *Annotated Apocalypse*, Russia, early 19th century, fol. 96v., National Library in Warsaw, Akc. 12372

accepting the marks of the Antichrist and the believers' attempts to avoid any connection with the Antichrist's world. Accepting "the mark of Antichrist" consisted in, according to the Old Believers, making the sign of the cross with three fingers instead of two.⁴⁷ The Old Believers also considered the tattoos made on the left arm of every soldier by order of Peter I, or even passports, to be such marks; the latter were seen as meant to put "the number of the Beast" on the people of Russia.⁴⁸ The Old Believer concept of evil and destiny is also depicted in another miniature in fol. 96v (Fig. 4), which shows a vision of hell awaiting those who worship the Beast and accept its mark (Revelation 14, 9).⁴⁹ It shows a group of people bowing low before the crowned Beast, as well as the abyss of hell and the people inside it. The abyss contains pits for the tortured souls; a devil with a club stands watch over them.



Fig. 5. *Vision of an Angel Standing on the Sun: The Casting of the Beast and the False Prophet into a Fiery Lake Burning with Sulphur.* Miniature from the *Annotated Apocalypse*, Russia, early 19th century, fol. 133v., National Library in Warsaw, Akc. 12372

47 Przybył, op. cit., pp. 122–124.

48 *Старообрядчество. Лица, события, предметы и символы...*, p. 30; Зеньковский, op. cit., p. 469; cf. E. Iwaniec, *Z dziejów staroobrzędowców na ziemiach polskich XVII-XX w.* [From the history of Old Believers in Poland, 17th to 20th century], Warsaw 1977, p. 45. Radical groups also rejected books with watermarks containing dates after the birth of Christ, as well as stamps, which they considered to be "marks of the Antichrist" as well. E. И. Дергачева-Скоп, В. И. Алексеев, *Репертуар традиционного чтения старообрядческих согласий Сибири. Этюды нравственной философии*, in: *Skupiska staroobrzędowców...*, p. 47.

49 Sulikowska, *Znaki Antychrysta...*, pp. 84, 92, Fig. X.

The picture on folio 133v (Fig. 5) depicts the ultimate confrontation between the Word, that is, the Son of God, shown sitting astride a horse and surrounded by angels in heaven, and the forces of darkness.⁵⁰ It shows birds attacking people, called in by an angel standing on the sun: “Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God; That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great” (Revelation 19, 17–18). It is also a representation of the moment when the Beast and the False Prophet “both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone” (Revelation 19, 20). This situation continues into the miniature of fol. 136v (Fig. 6), where an angel binds the dragon, “that old serpent” (Revelation 20, 1–2), kept in a bottomless pit, so that he may “shut him up, and set a seal upon him” (Revelation 20, 3).⁵¹ The miniature on fol. 141v (Fig. 7) depicts the events to come after a millennium – the liberation of Satan and his attack at the head of the nations of Gog and Magog upon “the camp of the saints” and the “beloved city” (Revelation 20, 9), the fire falling from heaven on the attackers, and the devil cast into “the lake of fire and brimstone” (Revelation 20, 10).⁵² The miniature of fol. 143v (Fig. 8)



Fig. 6. *Vision of an Angel Binding the Dragon.* Miniature from the *Annotated Apocalypse*, Russia, early 19th century, fol. 136v., National Library in Warsaw, Akc. 12372

50 Ibid., pp. 89–90, Fig. XII.

51 Ibid., pp. 84, 90, Fig. XIII.

52 Ibid., pp. 85, 90, Fig. XIV.



Fig. 7. Satan Freed from Prison; Vision of the Nations of Gog and Magog. Miniature from the *Annotated Apocalypse*, Russia, early 19th century, fol. 141v., National Library in Warsaw, Akc. 12372



Fig. 8. Vision of The One Who Sits On The Throne. Judgement over the Dead. Miniature from the *Annotated Apocalypse*, Russia, early 19th century, fol. 143v., National Library in Warsaw, Akc. 12372

shows the judgement over the nations.⁵³ Christ Pantocrator is portrayed in heaven, among books, while the lower half of the image depicts the moment that Death and Hell give up the bodies of the dead before being thrown into the lake of fire as well (Revelation 20, 13).

These icons and miniatures belong to a larger group of representations that were created from the second half of the 17th century in places linked with the Old Believers. Although their iconography has roots in Byzantine and Old Russian traditions, they were mostly connected with the current situation of Old Believer communities, particularly with the prevalent eschatological moods. These tensions caused some topics to gain popularity among the faithful and their Old Russian versions were reinterpreted. An example of this process is the popularity of the depictions of Archangel Michael, Archistrategos of the Heavenly Hosts, in Russia of the 18th and 19th centuries, even though these depictions are essentially absent from the post-Byzantine iconography. They were most definitely inspired by the Revelation to John, as attested by their various elements which copy the motif of the book; it has to be pointed out, however, that icons of the Archistrategos cannot be treated as simple illustrations to it. This is because the image connects various motifs appearing throughout the text of the Revelation, such as, for example, the Archangel's horse, the book in his hand, the trumpet he is blowing or the rainbow above him. All of these motifs may, in fact, appear in miniatures of Old Believer editions of the Apocalypse. Yet those themes, particularly the killing of the devil as seen in the icon of the Archistrategos, were reassembled in order to summarise, so to speak, those passages of the Apocalypse which describe the fight of good against evil, and to add a Eucharistic sense to a depiction thus interpreted by showing Christ behind the altar. Therefore, by drawing on eschatological and Eucharistic subjects at the same time, the image of the Archangel Michael retains an ideological link to the depictions of *John the Baptist as the Angel of the Desert*.

Nevertheless, it certainly has to be stressed that inspirations for the painting of the Archangel as the Archistrategos make reference not only to the Apocalypse but also to numerous other descriptions of the end of the world that date from various periods.⁵⁴ In a popular apocryphal book, *The Journey of the God-bearer through the Places of Torture*, Michael is called the "Archistrategos", the "first warrior", "first among the army of heaven" or "the pride of the heavenly hosts".⁵⁵ In spiritual poems circulating among the Old Believers he is dubbed "the terrible Voivode of the heavenly force", "hetman of the heavenly forces" and the "terrible hetman of heaven's army".⁵⁶ One of the texts describes the Archangel as follows: "There is a place on earth where a river flows, an unusual river, with fire instead of water.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 85, 90, Fig. XIV.

⁵⁴ Cf. Нечаева, op. cit., p. 160.

⁵⁵ *Хождение Богородицы по мукам*, ed. М. В. Рождественская, in: *Библиотека литературы Древней Руси*, vol. 3, <http://lib.pushkinskijdom.ru/Default.aspx?tabid=4930> [accessed 9 January 2017].

⁵⁶ *Pieśń o niebieskiej księżdzie...*, pp. 238–239.

Over the fiery river only Michael the Archangel sails and he carries the dead people's souls, the souls of the just to the bright paradise, heavenly light".⁵⁷ Thus construed, the archangel was a mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and it is as such that he must be viewed in the icon of the Archistrategos of the Heavenly Hosts; in a sense, this representation is equivalent to, for example, depictions of Christ's descent into hell, where angels are shown impaling devils on spears and killing them (Figs. 9–10).⁵⁸



Fig. 9. *Resurrection of Christ.* Old Rus', Stroganov School, 17th century, icon from an Old Believer collection. National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. IK 60 MNW



Fig. 10. *Resurrection of Christ.* Rus', Palekh, 18th–19th century, National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. IK 53 MNW

The depictions of infernal forces, devils, fiends, and Satan himself, as seen in the images discussed herein, were occasionally disputed among the Old Believers – the controversy stemming from the traditional conviction that the purpose of icons is to picture God's reality, a "world turned unto divine", a holy world where there was no place for devils and profane beings. In both 16th- and 17th-century Rus', the appropriateness of the fact that ordinary and (especially) sinful people prayed in front of icons was occasionally criticised.⁵⁹ The 16th-century tale of Basil the Blessed

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 220.

⁵⁸ I. Bentchev, *Engelikenen. Machtvolle Bilder himmlischer Boten*, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 1999, pp. 150–151.

⁵⁹ Д. И. Антонов, М. Р. Майзульс, *Демоны и грешники в древнерусской иконографии. Семиотика образа*, Москва 2011, p. 19

supposedly destroying an icon of the Virgin Mary on the Varvarskye gate in Kitaygorod, as he saw a devil painted in it (even though in a concealed way), is also well known.⁶⁰ This act was considered a sign of the *yurodivy*'s wisdom and insight, of his ability to "see beyond the image".

Many of the Old Believers feared to worship icons featuring elements of an "ungodly" world, such as the sun and the moon in a scene of the crucifixion.⁶¹ They were afraid of the depictions of Christ's entry into Jerusalem, believing that by venerating them the faithful would worship the donkey.⁶² They even doubted whether it was right to pray before the images of St. George killing the dragon (Fig. 11), concerned that such a prayer would amount to the veneration of animals.⁶³ However, their greatest worry were icons depicting devils, even in unequivocally holy contexts, such as the Resurrection (Figs. 9–10).⁶⁴ This matter was problematic for the Old Believers, as their culture was, to a considerable degree, built on a fear of the Antichrist and of demonic activity.

A fine example of this can be found in Nikolai Leskov's short story *The Sealed Angel*, published in 1873. It describes the search by a group of Old Believers for proper, that is traditional, icons for their house of prayer. "That evening I had a long talk with two painters (...). One of them sold me an icon for forty roubles and went away. The other painter said, 'You won't care to offer prayers before this icon. (...) Because,' said he, 'it is hell-painted'; and then with his nail he scratched, and a layer of the paint flew off from one corner, and on the background below was painted a devil with a tail. He rubbed away another piece and another devil appeared."⁶⁵ This passage fully demonstrates the Old Believers' fear of devils and their conviction that they could easily be tricked into praying before an icon of one and should therefore be wary of the images they worshipped (much like Basil the Blessed was). Aside from the fear of Satan and the devils, it also shows how important icons were to the Old Believers. This was partly the reason why they were so insistent that the faithful pray before icons painted according to the old style. They were constantly anxious that the icons of the official Church could be used to hide evil and that their worship could lead believers to bow before fiends. Avvakum believed that the "Nikonians" would utter the words "I pray to thee, O impure spirit" while making the sign of the cross,⁶⁶ and all Old Believers were willing to suspect that the icons and crosses coming from the mainstream Church represented the Church of Satan. A number of Old Believer drawings (e.g. in the early 20th-century *Tale of Patriarch Nikon*) show the Patriarch Nikon praying before a four-shouldered ("Nikonian")

60 B. Uspiensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, Lisse 1976, p. 28, note 52.

61 Антонов, Майзульс, *Демоны и грешники...*, pp. 19–20

62 Ibid., p. 20; Tarasov, op. cit., p. 161.

63 Cf. Uspiensky, *The Semiotics...*, p. 67.

64 Tarasov, op. cit., p. 161.

65 N. Leskov, *The Sealed Angel*, translated by B. L. Tollemache, in: *Russian Sketches, Chiefly of Peasant Life*, selected by B. L. Tollemache, London 1913, p. 66–67.

66 Список 1 с писем страдальческих священнопротопопа Аввакума, in: *Памятники старообрядческой письменности*, op. cit., p. 282; cf. Przybył, op. cit., p. 124.



Fig. 11. *Saint George Slaying a Dragon*, Russia, Old Believer workshop, 19th century, National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. IK 72 MNW



Fig. 12. *Saint Nicetas Slaying a Devil*, Old Rus', 16th century, National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. IK 209 MNW

cross with a serpent writhing around it.⁶⁷ Moreover, these fears were reflected in a number of Old Believer moral rules, such as avoiding uttering of the words “fiend”, “devil” or “Satan” in order to avoid tainting one’s lips with the sinful name.⁶⁸

The surviving Old Believer works indicate that, declarations aside, artistic practice did not refuse to depict fiends and other evil entities; moreover, it can be stated that these pieces drew on ancient traditions, both Byzantine and Old Russian, and in some periods and areas they became quite popular. One subject that was present already in Old Russian art, namely Saint Nicetas slaying a devil, became common among the Old Believers. The saint is shown in a dark cell, beating the fiend with a heavy instrument.⁶⁹ This motif was frequently depicted on small metal icons

⁶⁷ Tarasov, op. cit., Fig. 51; cf. Гранин, op. cit., Fig. p. 55.

⁶⁸ Jaroszewicz-Pieriesławcew, op. cit., p. 125.

⁶⁹ Д. И. Антонов, М. Р. Майзульс, *Анатомия Ада. Путеводитель по древнерусской визуальной демонологии*, Москва 2014, 2013, p. 228; В. В. Хухарев, *Сюжет из жития “Никитино мучение” на предметах личного благочестия*, in: *Демонология как семиотическая система*, вып. 2, Москва 2013, pp. 141–153; Нечаева, Чернов, op. cit., Fig. 8; *Russische Ikonen und Kulturgerät aus St. Petersburg*. Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden. 5. Oktober 1991 – 6. Januar 1992, cat. no. 59.

(Fig. 12) which the Old Believers carried on their chests to protect themselves from evil.⁷⁰

A similar notion was expressed in the icons of the Guardian Angel, where he was shown fighting with devils over human souls.⁷¹ Old Believer drawings also display such depictions, e.g. in illustrations teaching the proper way of making the sign of the cross⁷² or in images of evil people who are shown with fiends on their shoulders.⁷³ The drawings in *Pure Soul* show the titular heroine standing before the Lord of Hosts. She is depicted as a crowned virgin with flowers in her right hand, pouring a jug of tears onto a devil.⁷⁴ Elsewhere, similar images show angels fighting devils; the latter are accompanied by a personification of the world, which symbolises its temptations.⁷⁵ Depictions known as *The Death of a Just and Unjust Man* display the former in a bed surrounded by angels on the one side and on the other by an evil man at whose bed stand devils and a single angel.⁷⁶ An interesting and fairly unique example is *Satan's Tree*, a picture from a *shornik* produced in the Onega region between the 16th and 17th centuries. It displays a peculiar family tree – the branches covered in fiends grow out of the body of an enthroned Satan.⁷⁷ In most cases, in icons, craftworks and drawings alike, Satan and the devils are shown in profile (in contrast to the saints), so that the faithful do not run the risk of making eye contact with them.⁷⁸

The presence of evil forces in Old Believer art is certainly a consequence of their focus on issues of conflict between good and evil. The fight between the Antichrist and the stuck-in-the-past world was real to the Old Believers, i.e. it took place in the here and now. The Old Believers believed that the religious and cultural changes that had occurred in Russia after the mid-17th century caused God's grace to abandon the land, but that they had chosen the correct side in this war, fighting and dying for the "faith of their fathers" and thereby they had become the chosen righteous who would be granted eternal life. "We shall stand before the just God," Avvakum assured them, "stand as men who have not sold the true faith. Now it is still severe winter, but a sweet paradise [it is], now – painful suffering, but what a pleasure it is to endure it".⁷⁹ This confidence in such a fate was significant in the context of the Antichrist's supposed rule of the earth, which induced the faithful to wait for the

70 Cf. Хухарев, op. cit., pp. 142, 153.

71 Bentchev, op. cit., Fig. p. 115.

72 *Русский рисованный лубок...*, Fig. p. 124, cat. no. 75; Fig. p. 127, cat. no. 76; Fig. p. 137, cat. no. 89.

73 Ibid., cat. no. 62.

74 Ibid., cat. no. 22, 24, pp. 180–181.

75 Tarasov, op. cit., Fig. 55.

76 *Русский рисованный лубок...*, cat. 28; Tarasov, op. cit., Fig. 57.

77 Антонов, Майзулис, *Анатомия Ада...*, Fig. 5, p. 218; Брюсова, op. cit., Fig. 176.

78 М. Р. Майзульс, "Бес за спиной: жесты дьявола в древнерусской иконографии", in: *Демонология как семиотическая система* вып. 2, Москва 2013, p. 108; Антонов, Майзульс, *Демоны и грешники...*, pp. 285–291.

79 *Памятники литературы древней Руси. XVII век. Книга первая*, Москва 1988, p. 556.

end of the world (*parousia*) and believe that they were living at a time when the chosen would undergo trials. This line of thought is present in most Old Believer writings and is often expressed directly: "So we may save ourselves, give us the strength to bear the cross [...]. Look upon the innocence of hearts, O Father, our guardian. [...] Here we spend our days in tears, our joy is in heaven".⁸⁰ This perception of their own group as the chosen people⁸¹ was expressed even more forcefully in spiritual poems alluding to the Old Believer rejection of passports: "We have a passport from the high city of Jerusalem," states one such text, "we have run away from an evil master, another Lord set us free – supreme and only God! [...] He summons us to him, reaches out to us, does not bring up our sins".⁸²

However, even though eschatology is a focal point of Old Believer culture which constantly returns to the subject of the Antichrist and evil in the world, its presence in art seems much less pronounced than in the writings. It may be stated that everything connected with Old Believer icons relates to eschatology one way or another; but while issues of the Antichrist and the expected end of the world have been spectacularly expressed in Old Believer literature, panel painting was historically more reserved in that respect. It features few grand depictions of the Last Judgement, with monumental scenes of suffering sinners and the rejoicing righteous.⁸³ Apocalyptic – or, more broadly, eschatological – subjects are present here only as a part of a larger, often complicated, whole, as is the case in a small household icon painted in northern Russia in the 18th century which is now at the National Museum in Warsaw (Fig. 13). It shows Saint Nicholas surrounded by six paintings of the Mother of God as well as (in the upper part of the work) a scene of the Resurrection of Christ and twelve depictions of church holidays and saints. This is a fairly unique version of this iconographic subject, as it only shows Christ Pantocrator between Mary and John the Baptist with the angels, and the *etimasia* among the assembled saints.

Sometimes these themes appear in Old Believer art as something of an aside, on the margins of other depictions, often ones focusing on the fight between good and evil. Nevertheless, it bears highlighting that these themes were very popular, as attested both by the fact that miniatures such as those in the *Annotated Apocalypse* were in large circulation and by how numerous apocalyptic and eschatological icons and drawings were. They came from all centres of Old Believer art and were diverse in their artistic quality. This also means that they made their way into various social groups within the Old Faith and that all of them had a profound influence on how the believers' views of the world were shaped.

80 Т. С. Рождественский, *Памятники старообрядческой поэзии*, Москва, 1910, p. 145.

81 Cf. M. Perrie, "Moscow in 1666: New Jerusalem, Third Rome, Third Apostasy", *Questio Rossica*, 2014, no. 3, pp. 82–83.

82 Рождественский, op. cit., p. 131.

83 Cf. N. Anufrieva, "Иконография Страшного Суда по двум памятникам книжных собраний Урало-Сибирского региона" [Iconography of the Last Judgement on the Example of Two Book Monuments from Collections of the Regions of Urals and Siberia], *Przegląd Wschodnioeuropejski*, 2016, no. 7 (1), pp. 68–69; Tarasov, op. cit., Fig. 52.

Fig. 13. *Saint Nicholas among the Images of the Mother of God, Resurrection of Christ with prazdnik icon miniatures, and Last Judgement with prazdnik icon miniatures and images of saints, northern Russia, 18th century, National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. IK 383 MNW*



In the Old Believer perception of the world, art was unequivocally a part of the sacrum as a value that – according to doctrine – could not be tainted in any way and was not subject to any sort of gradation. Even though Old Believer art was intended to be tightly bound to tradition, the way of thinking about icons gradually diverged from “traditional Orthodoxy”, which had focused on contemplation and epistemology. Over time, depictions following not only Russian 16th- and 17th-century traditions but also the principles of Western iconography became accepted. This paved the way for new themes, including parts of the apocalyptic and eschatological repertoire.

Icons were a part of life for Old Believer communities detached from the outside world they considered foreign, dangerous and threatening – the world of the Antichrist. Fearing Satan and his deceptions, the Old Believers considered their own groups and their icons sacred and divine, and therefore also thought the icon painters should be a part of this sanctified reality – and a guaranteed way to connect to it was to stay true to the old traditions.⁸⁴ Therefore, the Old Believers could reject outside (i.e. official Church) icons that included suspect depictions of Satan or the devils, but the images of evil forces in their own icons were always understood

⁸⁴ Tarasov, op. cit., pp. 167–184.

within the context dominated by faith in the ultimate victory of good over evil and of the Old Believer traditional order over the world which, in their perception, was still ruled by the Antichrist.

Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz

Abstract

The article considers the Old Believers' beliefs about, and the manner of depicting, the Antichrist, the end of the world, Satan and the devils. It discusses how both Old Believer literature and philosophy relate to their art, which was created between the second half of the 17th century and 1917. The subject matter includes popular images from Old Believer iconography, such as images of John the Baptist, the Angel of the Desert, the Archangel Michael, the Archistrategos of the Heavenly Hosts, Saint Nicetas fighting a devil, or Saint George slaying a dragon, as well as several illustration sets from various editions of the Old Believer *Annotated Apocalypse*. Many of the Old Believer icons, drawings and craftworks from various groups and workshops display angels, but also Satan and the devils. The latter may be considered particularly controversial in the light of the doctrine of icon painting and of the Old Believers' particular beliefs. The article attempts to answer the question as to what reasons stood behind the fear of such representations and why they were ultimately accepted by the faithful.