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Access to Resources and Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of Old Believers in North America: a Case Study of an Online Bibliography

Abstract: This article discusses the history of the development and significance of the “Old Believers Bibliography in North America”, a digital resource dedicated to the documentation and preservation of the cultural legacy of Old Believers in North America. It addresses how this comprehensive digital bibliography provides access to a broad range of resources, including scholarly articles, historical documents, and multimedia content, pertinent to the study of Old Believer communities. The article highlights the role of this online platform in enhancing research accessibility, facilitating academic scholarship, and promoting cultural preservation as well as underlines the bibliography’s impact on both scholarly research and community awareness of Old Believers. It reflects on the broader implications of digital bibliographies in preserving intangible cultural heritage and fostering diverse historical narratives.

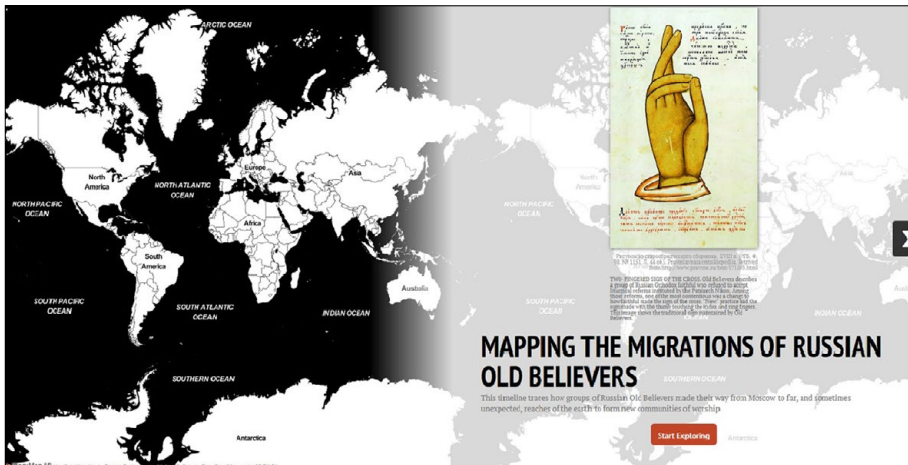
Keywords: Old Believers, Digital Bibliography, Cultural Preservation, North America, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Online Resources, Scholarly Research, Heritage Documentation, Community Engagement, Digital Humanities

Słowa kluczowe: staroobrzędowcy, bibliografia cyfrowa, ochrona kultury, Ameryka Północna, niematerialne dziedzictwo kulturowe, zasoby online, badania naukowe, dokumentacja dziedzictwa, zaangażowanie społeczności, humanistyka cyfrowa

Historical Background

The Old Believers (also known as Old Ritualists) are a group of Russian Orthodox Christians who maintain the traditional practices of the Russian Orthodox Church as they existed before the reforms of Patriarch Nikon (1605–1681) in the mid-seventeenth century. These reforms led to a schism within the Russian Orthodox Church, with the Old Believers separating from the official church. As Old Believers clung to the old rites and customs, they faced persecution and were forced to flee to remote regions of Russia and, eventually, some of the Old Believers found their way to North America. Notable North American settlements are found in Alaska, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and other parts of the continent, including Canada where they have preserved their unique religious practices, language, and cultural traditions. This includes the use of Church Slavonic in liturgical services, traditional forms of chanting, specific rituals, and making the sign of the cross in the old manner.

III.1. Old Believers Story Map by Brendan Nieubuurt, Librarian for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, University of Michigan Library



Source: Old Believers in North America: Online Web Bibliography.

Preservation of the Cultural Legacy of Old Believers in North America

While preserving their identity, Old Believer communities in North America also exhibit varying degrees of integration into local culture. The level of interaction with broader society varies among different groups with some maintaining a more isolated existence and others being open to external influences

and interactions. For example, Edward Kasinec described his *Observations on Slavonic Book Culture, with Notes on a Recent Expedition to Woodburn, Oregon*¹ at the symposium organized by the Russian and East European Studies Program at the University of Oregon in May 1978. These observations were later published in the journal “St.Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly”. In 1978, Kasinec conducted:

a week-long survey (May 9–16) of documentary holdings of the Russian Old Believers residing in Marion County, Oregon. This area encompasses a number of towns, including Gervais, Mount Angel, and most importantly, Woodburn.

III.2. Professor Irina Vasilevna Pozdeeva of Moscow State University named after M.V. Lomonosov presenting in Woodburn, Oregon, 2011



Photograph by Tamara Morris.

According to Kasinec, Oregonian Old Believers might well have the largest single accumulation of Old Ritualist related print materials outside of Russia which he groups into five types:

1. Reprints of religious texts published between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries. These facsimiles were executed in either Portland or Pronto Grosso, Brazil.

¹ E. Kasinec, *Observations on Slavonic Book Culture, with Notes on a Recent Expedition to Woodburn, Oregon*, “St.Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly” 1979, vol. 23, no. 3–4, p. 220.

2. Reprints and original publications of liturgical texts published between 1905 and 1917 at the Rogozhsk and Preobrazhensk cemeteries in Moscow or at the Siberian Old Believer typographies in Uralsk. Virtually all of the private and corporate collections have these twentieth-century texts.
3. Official (Synodal) Slavonic imprints of the nineteenth centuries. Although these are chronologically close to the second group, they can be distinguished in terms of their provenance. Some were published in provinces (e.g. Pskov), but the greater number found in Marion County collections appeared in the Moscow Synodal typography during the second half of the nineteenth century.
4. Manuscripts. The number of manuscripts codices was small in comparison with printed books. One item, perhaps from the seventeenth century, was the oldest item found; some *Sinodiki* (memorial books) were on paper having nineteenth-century watermarks.
5. Pre-Nikonian Slavonic printed books. Several of the private collections contained texts of the seventeenth century, although most of the rarest items have been centralized. One central repository contained upwards of forty texts, some of which dated from the beginning of the seventeenth century².

Development of the Online Bibliography of Old Believers in North America

In an attempt to document Old Believer culture, Margaret McKibben began the development of an online bibliography of *Old Believers in North America* which is hosted by the University of Oregon Libraries. McKibben describes the resource as follows:

This bibliography aspires to list and describe every dissertation, thesis, book, article, film, recording, museum, archive, website and newspaper which deals with Russian Old Believer life in North America. At publication (November 2007) about 150 individual items are listed, not counting 30-odd museums, archives and newspapers. Many items are scholarly—dissertations, scholarly books, journal articles. Many items are not scholarly—local histories, memoirs, magazine articles, and films. All have been included because they add a substantial piece to the record and are publicly available. Some items have been intentionally left out. You will find no directory of Old Believer churches or prayer halls here, as many congregations prefer to keep such information under their own control. I have listed only such active Old Believer institutions (prayer halls, churches, monasteries) as already maintain a public presence in print or on the web³.

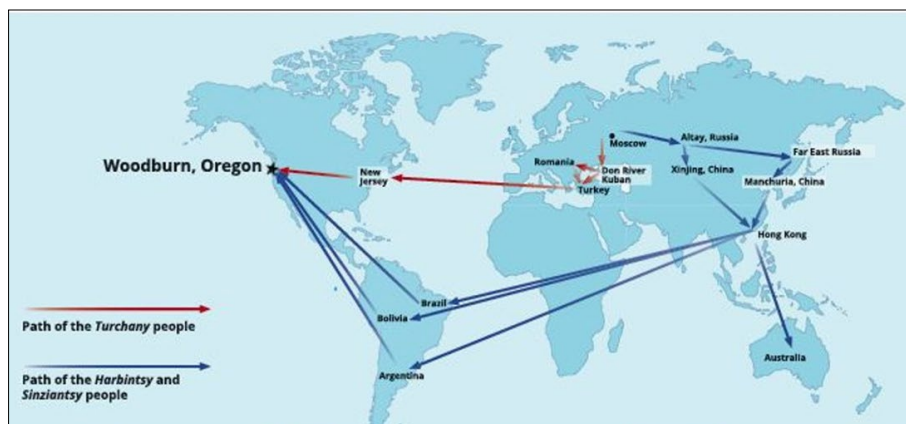
2 E. Kasinec, op. cit., p. 221–222.

3 M. McKibben, *Old Believers in North America: Online Web Bibliography*, Eugene, Oregon, [online] <https://oldbelievers.uoregon.edu/> [accessed 01.02.2023].

Community members, scholars, and librarians were involved in the process of creating the bibliography. Especially notable and valuable was the collaboration with Leonid Leonidovich Kasatkin and Rozaliia Frantsevna Kasatkina who generously provided a lengthy list of sources published in Russia. McKibben also emphasized that Yoshikazu Nakamura was an invaluable guide to the Japanese language literature. Repetitious McKibben created indexes to crosslink the data and facilitate searches. “The author index,” as she notes,

allows scholars to easily review the accuracy of their own listings... The discipline/subject index lists scholarly works according to the academic discipline of the author. It further lists all works according to the major subject areas covered. Thus, a linguist writing about terminology used for clothing will find their work listed under both ‘linguistics’ and ‘textiles and costume.’ The group index lists all materials according to the Old Believer population group they describe. In identifying ‘groups’ I have relied on history rather than current confessional or settlement patterns. Thus, the ‘Pennsylvania,’ ‘Alberta,’ and ‘Oregon’ groups are comprised, respectively, of the Pomortsy who settled in Pennsylvania in the 1890s, the Popovtsy who settled in Alberta in the 1920s, and the (mostly) Chasovnyne who arrived in Oregon in the 1960s, plus their respective descendants, regardless of current religious affiliation or place of residence.

III. 3. Map adapted by Tamara Morris



Source: Old Believers in North America: Online Web Bibliography.

Online Bibliography in the Age of “Transformative Digital Humanities”⁴

In 2018, the University of Oregon’s program in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies (UO REEES) organized a conference on “Russians in the Pacific Northwest: From Fort Ross to the Aleutian Islands”. One of the panels was dedicated to Old Believers and included presentations by UO REEES Professor Emeritus Tamara Morris (Yumsunova) and Amir Khisamutdinov, Professor at Central Scientific Library, Far Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Since then, University of Oregon Libraries have started exploring how the bibliography of *Old Believers in North America* can be transformed in accordance with new technologies and advancements. “Digital transformation involves vision, strategy, processes, and technology,” as Gurdish Sandu notes in *The Role of Academic Libraries in the Digital Transformation of the Universities*⁵. The vision of transformation regarding *Old Believers in North America* is to make sure that the online bibliography serves as a gateway to understanding and appreciating the unique history and culture of Old Believers. Another goal is to serve as a resource for researchers, students, and anyone interested in local history and cultural heritage. The re-edited online bibliography provides access to resources that show the recent developments and changes in the lives of Old Believers in Oregon including their language, customs, and even their travel plans after discovering the Dubches monasteries in Russia, which is a sacred place for many Old Believers. During the Stalin era, the persecution of religious minorities, including the Old Believers, intensified. Notable monasteries, such as those along the Dubches River, were discovered and destroyed by Soviet authorities, leading to the arrest and imprisonment of many of their members. These events were documented by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his work *The Gulag Archipelago*⁶. In recent years, Tamara Morris (Yumsunova) has described the Old Believers pilgrimages to the monasteries in her article *Iz Oregona na Enisei. Kak starovery Oregona uznali o sushchestvovanii Dubchesskikh skitov* [From Oregon to Yenisei: How the Old Believers of Oregon Learned About the Existence of the Dubches Monasteries]⁷.

4 *Transformative Digital Humanities: Challenges Opportunities*, eds. M. McAleer Balkun, M. Mestrovic Deyrup, London 2020.

5 G. Sandhu, *The role of academic libraries in the digital transformation of the universities*, [in:] *5th International Symposium on Emerging Trends and Technologies in Libraries and Information Services (ETTLIS)*, 2018, pp. 292–296, [online] <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/8485258> [accessed 14.02.2023].

6 *Meeting of frontiers*, [Washington, D.C. 1999-], [online] <https://lcn.loc.gov/99483831> [accessed 14.02.2023].

7 T. Morris, *Iz Oregona na Enisei. Kak Starovery Oregona Uznali o Sushchestvovanii Dubchesskikh Skitov*, “Staroobriadets” 2020, no. 78, p. 24.

Digital transformation of the bibliography involves integrating multimedia resources and creating interlinked data, utilizing digital platforms for wider dissemination. The digital nature of these resources allows for more frequent updates and ensures that the latest research, publications, and developments are readily available, providing the user of the online bibliography with the most current information. The online bibliography of *Old Believers in North America* includes links to related fields, encouraging interdisciplinary research. The selected online resources often include various formats (e.g., articles, e-books, videos, podcasts, images, etc.), catering to different learning preferences and needs. This inclusivity enhances the learning and research experience for diverse academic and public communities.

III. 4. Old Believers Prayer House of the Assumption
of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Bethlehem Drive in Woodburn, Oregon.
This Priestless (without priests) Prayer House was rebuilt after a fire in 2016



Photograph by Heghine Hakobyan.

III. 5. The Church of the Ascension of Christ for Priested Old Believers on Bethlehem Drive in Woodburn, Oregon. The church was built after the split of Old Believers into *Popovtsy* (with Priests / Priested) and *Bezpopovtsy* (Priestless / Without Priests) that took place in the 1980s



Photograph by Heghine Hakobyan.

Conclusion

The online bibliography of Old Believers in North America is a testament to the power of digital technology in preserving and sharing cultural heritage. By providing bibliographical access to a wealth of resources, it ensures that the legacy of Old Believers in North America is preserved for future generations, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of this unique community. The Old Believer online bibliography is more than just a collection of bibliographies, it serves multiple purposes:

1. The bibliography offers an extensive bibliographic description of books, articles, theses and dissertations, and multimedia resources that are valuable for researchers, historians, educators, and students interested in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Russian history, and cultural studies.
2. The bibliography helps to document and preserve the cultural and religious heritage of the Old Believers in North America, ensuring that their traditions and history are not lost.
3. The bibliography serves as an educational resource for the general public, providing insights into the lives and beliefs of one of the religious communities in North America.
4. The bibliography supports the global movement towards open scholarship and democratizes access to academic knowledge.

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We are excited to share that we are diligently working on the updates, focusing on the latest publications about the Old Believers in North America. As we strive to provide the most comprehensive and insightful content, we would like to invite online bibliography users to be a part of the journey. If you are aware of any new publications, groundbreaking research, or innovative studies that could enrich the online bibliography, we would be delighted to hear from you. Please feel free to reach out to H. Hakobyan at heghineh@uoregon.edu with any information or suggestions.

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