

Russian Old Believers Case: Technical Innovations as Inadmissible "Devil" Loans

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Modern social sciences set the traditionalism against innovations and economic growth. This is true for many spheres of social practice. But results of the real analysis of business history concrete cases put some questions. In Russian Old Believers history we can see a discord between profound conservatism in their spiritual and everyday lives, on the one hand, and broad innovative adoptions in several industries where Old Believers established their leadership in the first half of the 19th century, on the other hand.

Clarification of this problem can clear a question, important for business history, about sociocultural, including religious, entrepreneurship development factors.

For this study, various Old Belief religious manuscripts, memoirs and correspondence of the Old Believer entrepreneurs, documents of their textile factories, and both publicly available and archival sources were employed.

Old Believers in Russia were religious dissidents who renounced the mid-17th century religious reforms. Throughout their existence, Old Believers have subjectively aimed “to flee from novelty ... since novelty is obscene whereas antiquity is sacred”¹. “We shall not amend the rules set by the ancestors”², Avvakum and his followers stressed, referring in the first turn to the religious and ecclesiastic novelties, “And shall flee the filth of the new words, i.e. new doctrines, issues and opinions contravening antiquity and anciencey whereas their acceptance shall inevitably ruin the faith of the holy fathers”³. Since Old Believers consecrated their everyday practices with even a household routine becoming part of the religious connotation for a piety zealot, the prohibition of a “wicked work of novelty invention and worship service modification”⁴ was further expanded to permeate all and any facet of a true believer’s methodically regulated lifestyle. In preachment books – Tsvetniks or Patterns – the daily restrictions, tableware and clothing care instructions and other regulations were alternated by the praying and fasting rules. “This is a Christian faith and wholehearted trust in God”, one of the Tsvetniks pointed out.⁵

In the context of the Old Believers’ Methodism, a range of formally domestic restrictions were practiced, mainly repudiating any novities in general and adoptions from abroad in particular.

Between late 17th century and mid-19th century (and even later in some communities) it was prohibited to attend “festivities” such as comedies, operas and masked balls (on Sundays in particular), wear “foreign style” or “unnatural” dress, use “alien saddle”, “eat salad grass”, consume tobacco, tea, “intoxicating drinks” (“due to hardships and grievances of the present days and our promise to live in chastity and observe purity”⁶), cut hair, “anatomize”, visit horse races, teach child-

ren “demonic song and dance” instead of holy psalms, powder hair, eat potatoes (“dog’s nutsack”), oysters and frogs, keep at homes – instead of icons – “paintings of Hellenic gods, trees and birds”, celebrate Christmas with decorated trees (“pagan rite”), make “naked angels of alabaster resembling Hellenic cupids”, and many other things.⁷

Anything of foreign origin excited an even greater repudiation than mere innovations, even though while rejecting any foreign dress, Old Believers pioneered in introducing imported innovative technologies to textile and some other industries in the 18th and 19th centuries. The books of the Old Believers do not contain any prohibitions on use of technical materials, machinery and equipment for industrial purposes. The involvement of the entrepreneurs and technicians from among the Old Believers in the Russian industries modernization (initially based on the foreign adoptions and later on the Russian inventions as well) was of a rather impressive scale.

In mid-18th century the residents of the Vygovsky enclave (a major Old Belief center of the time) were among the first ones to build new galliot vessels.⁸ In late 18th and first half of 19th centuries Old Believers pioneered in launching factories employing imported machinery and most advanced equipment.

Thus, Jacquard frames were first employed by a Moscovite Old Believer V. Sokolov in 1827 at his wool processing factory and then by other Old Believer entrepreneurs.⁹ Wax steam melting was first introduced in Russia in 1838 at candle-making and waxbleaching factory owned by V. Sapelkin, a parishioner of Rogozhsky Old Believers community.¹⁰

Old Believer industrialists were leaders in cotton manufacturing as well and started importing machinery from Belgium and France in 1830-s. Immediately after British Parliament lifted in 1842 a ban on industrial equipment exports¹¹, Savva Morozov was the first in Russia to acquire, through mediation of De Jersey C^o, British machinery (“Platt Br.” machines and “Hick Hargreaves” engines). Later, equipment of “Robert Hall & Co.”, “Musgrave & Son”, “John Harrison & Son” and other British and German companies started to be imported as well¹². Through expansion of his contacts with British producers, Savva Morozov ensured continuous improvement of his facilities and upgrading of his machinery. Having invited British engineers and factory masters, Morozov built Lancashire style mill towns. In Savva Morozov, Son & Co Partnership’s Nikolsky mill town, one of the central streets where most foreign specialists resided, was formally named English Street.

Savva Morozov was followed by the Khludovs, Maljutins, Yakunchikovs and other industrialists.¹³ The second generation entrepreneurs of those families followed technical innovations most attentively and regularly visited Britain and Germany to keep up-to-date. Some of them even set representative offices in Great Britain and hired English specialists to work there.¹⁴

Not only machinery was purchased in Great Britain, but all spare parts, small tools, bolts, screw nuts, and even warping bobbins and “paper straws for mule-jennies”.¹⁵ Since 1860s wooden and leather components (reels, spindles, straps, etc.) production was launched in Russia at the workshops of Savva Morozov’s fac-

tories. Nevertheless, for quite a long time new samples were still bought in Britain to be replicated at domestic facilities. In 1873, for example, several dozen warper bobbins were acquired in Liverpool and a company owned by F. Petrov was contracted to produce over 3400 such bobbins.¹⁶

Old Believers were among the first ones to start using steaming machines. In 1840 Savva Morozov was the first in the region to install a 16-horsepower steam engine at his Nikolsky woolen cloth factory.¹⁷ Soon thereafter, Savva Morozov's industries started to use peat as combustible for the steam machinery.¹⁸ In Starodubskt Region the situation was much the same, for example, in the middle of the 19th century 7 of 22 textile factories run by Old Believers in Klinttsy, employed "steamers".¹⁹ It was Old Believers who started to use electricity at their textile facilities; in 1883 Savva Morozov, Son & Co Partnership completed construction of Gorodishchi factory equipped with two turbines.²⁰

Many other outstanding entrepreneurs leading the development of the Russian industries were Old Believers as well. A major supporter of the technical and organizational innovations was Vassily Kokorev, an inspirator of multiple pathbreaking projects ranging from rail transportation (Volgo-Donskoye railroad joint stock company established in 1858, one of the first ones in Russia) and shipping companies (Caucasus & Mercury established in 1858) to commercial joint stock banks (Volzhsko-Kamsky Bank established in 1870) and innovative industrial and commercial companies. Kokorev - long before the American businessmen - Kokorev realized the importance of oilfields and built (with assistance of the then young Dmitry Mendeleev) the first oil refinery in Surkhany, where for the first time ever (earlier than in Pennsylvania) continuous oil distillation was employed; he also pioneered in using sea oil tankers, building petroleum pipelines, etc.²¹ Innovations were actively introduced at the factories of Matvey Kuznetsov, an unspoken leader of the porcelain production in Russia, generating $\frac{2}{3}$ of the industry output. Researchers believe that Kuznetsov's factories "facilitated and shaped technical progress in Russian porcelain industry".²²

Significantly, that trend was not characteristic for major entrepreneurs only. Small farmers – Old Believers - in Guslitsa area replaced their local breeds of hops with the breeds imported from Germany; later they started to experiment with the hops and created new breeds which produced better results than the breeds used in France and Belgium; they also introduced various innovations in the hops procession.²³ In the Urals area Old Belief craftsmen adopted advanced technologies of wire and sheet metal production and copper flattening from their Saxony counterparts and in the 1720s launched and further developed their own production.²⁴

Notably, the said trend was widespread among Old Belief peasantry and the same process may be observed in the rural households. According to the questionnaire of 1909, 12.1% of Old Belief farmers in European Russia owned "nearly every kind of advanced equipment" (weed whackers, seeders, harvesters, grain separators, steam or horse powered fanning mills, mechanical classifiers, etc.), while further 29.3% used just "some of agricultural machinery".²⁵ At the same time, in the Black Earth Belt, the most equipped in machinery terms,²⁶ in

1912–1913 merely 2 to 6% of all peasants (of whom majority were official church followers) employed any sort of agricultural machinery.²⁷

Russian large cotton industry was therefore a controversial mixture, since huge factories employing most advanced British machinery were following British expertise, used British loans and were built under technical supervision and with assistance by British experts, whereas that great technology leap in itself was initiated by mostly Old Believers, a highly conservative branch of the Russian Orthodoxy.

A most exemplar in this regard is the life of Timofey Morozov, manager and actual owner of one of the most advanced textile factories in Russia. Even though he opened an office in Liverpool and made frequent visits abroad, even though he regularly attended the English Club in Moscow and ensured his children got broad education including knowledge of foreign languages, in the opinion of his family “Timofey Morozov was a representative of the generation of the “old faith followers” hardly influenced by the western culture”²⁸. He was a deeply religious person, a “true believer” even by the Old Believers’ standards²⁹, who died while on his knees praying in the chapel of his country house in Crimea.³⁰ The personality of Timofey Morozov was of such a significance for the Old Believers that in 1911 when a portrait gallery of the outstanding parishioners was established at the Rogozhsky cemetery, the community council underlined “it was desirable to place” a portrait of Timofey Morozov among the top ones along with the portraits of the community ministers.³¹

Nevertheless, in other essential matters pertaining to salvation but irrelevant to the paramount Cause, even in charity, negation of innovations persisted. Workers who operated British machinery when in Rogozhsky community hospital in Moscow, were placed on wooden beds since hospital curators declared metal beds (widely used in state military hospitals) an “alien novelty”.³² Peter Vishnyakov strongly believed that knowledge of “foreign ideas and views causes public disorder, ungodliness and dangerous thinking”³³, even though at his gold drawing facility he employed imported machinery.

The paradoxical nature of the Old Believers entrepreneurship may be explained by the values incorporated in their faith.

Confessional restrictions did not apply to “good cause” and “true need”, and entrepreneurship was one of such “good causes”. The spiritual concept of the Cause (Deed) was formulated in early 19th century to form the core of the institutional system of the Old Believers’ economic activity. An Old Believer did not find property ownership a wrongdoing and saw himself not a proprietor striving to accumulate personal wealth and amass new assets, but rather an economic process facilitator with a personal obligation to the God and the society, not a person holding properties, but rather a person bearing responsibility for his Cause, his and others’ fate and the Faith. A Cause was perceived as “a labour for God’s sake” and a personal Christian feat thus inspiring Old Believers to become most zealous entrepreneurs. The concept encouraged innovative entrepreneurship and hence in combination with other components of the Old Belief ethics (labour ethics and profitable economic activity justification in the first turn) and traditions contributed to

shaping a new business culture. Its fundamental elements were personal honesty and trustworthiness, as well as owner's personal organizational involvement, personal responsibility of both the owner and the workers, and commitment to develop and advance businesses, as well as the obligation to use some of the proceeds for the benefit of the community and society.³⁴

Successful textile manufacture was impossible without employing equipment and bringing, at the initial stage, professionals from Western Europe. Old Believer industrialists strove to strengthen the "true Orthodoxy" while actively introduced imported machinery at their factories, so they then had to pray for forgiveness of sins consciously committed for the sake of the paramount deed of their lives.

Key Words: Russian Entrepreneurship History, Old Belief History, Economic History

Methods: Social Science History, Social Cultural History (Vital Values History), Narrative Analysis

This study aims to uncover and explore discord between profound conservatism of the Russian Old Believers in their spiritual and, insofar as incorporated in the overall sacral context, everyday lives, on the one hand, and broad innovative adoptions in several industries where Old Believers established their leadership in the first half of the 19th century, on the other hand. While renouncing foreign dress, tobacco, tea and potatoes, Old Believers were the first in Russia to import from Europe (primarily, from Britain) machinery, technologies and experts for textile industry. This collision is due to a specific paradigm of the Old Belief values centered around their spiritual concept of a Cause (Deed) as "a labour for God's sake" and a personal Christian feat. Confessional restrictions did not apply to "good cause. To make a Blessed God and Salutary Deed succeed, an intentional sin – including employment of imported machinery - was permissible.

For this study, various Old Belief religious manuscripts, memoirs and correspondence of the Old Believer entrepreneurs were reviewed along with records and documents of textile factories, and both publicly available and archival sources were employed.

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