

The Molokan Community in the Caucasus in the Nineteenth Century

by

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Abstract: This work focuses on a sectarian community of the Spiritual Christians, the Molokans, that was exiled to the Caucasian region (modern-day Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia and the North Caucasus republics of the Russian Federation) in the XIX century (1830-1905). The scholarship on the Molokans and this thesis exists on the interface of the history of religion, theological studies, and imperial history. It participates in discussing, in comparative perspective, how the Russian empire interacted with the schismatics in secular and religious terms. This thesis uses both the Molokan and the imperial perspectives in order to describe this community of faith without mystification and add nuance to the scholarly understanding of it. The Molokan theology and way of life is described in detail within the larger framework of debates about the Russian imperial structure and in the context of the center and periphery.

Keywords: *periphery, borderland, Caucasus, religion, sect, Spiritual Christianity, Molokan Christianity, imperial perspectives.*

Chapter I: Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to research the rift between Spiritual Christianity and Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the Russian empire as a rift between the center and the periphery. The Spiritual Christian Molokan community was considered a heretic sect in the Russian empire. It was forcefully displaced from central Russia to the Caucasus, along with its believers. The Molokan Christians have surprisingly more in common with the Reformist or Protestant churches of Western Europe than with the numerous traditional Eastern forms of Christianity, regarding, for example, the Molokan rejection of the holy tradition and an emphasis on the holy scripture, which was a factor leading to the crisis of disrupted subordination in the Russian empire. The main event that engineered this situation in the Caucasian region was the 1830 Expulsion Act of Nicholas I, which relocated all the sectarians in Russia and settled them in the Caucasus.¹ The research question of this thesis can be best framed as the following: Who were the Molokans in their vision of themselves and from the perspective of imperial governance?

The official religion of the Russian empire was Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was the institution behind many worldly and otherworldly matters. Eastern Orthodox Christianity can be best defined by the features of belief in the Divine Trinity of God the Son, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, the divinity of Christ, Christ's birth by Holy Mary the *Theotokos* or *Bogoroditsa*, the necessity of both faith and works for salvation of the soul during the Judgment Day. Religio-cultural and religio-artistic articles of Eastern Orthodox faith such as iconography and liturgy were fundamental for spirituality in the Russian empire. The liturgy and icons manifested a window which transpired the divine devotion of the Christian flock towards the Heaven. Simultaneously, the theo-political dimension was presented by a strong

¹ Zhuk, Sergei I. Russia's lost reformation. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. 791-792.

reliance on the hierarchy of priests. For the state, the discrepancy between the worldly power and the power of God led to the crisis of legitimacy thus mobilizing many theologians and scholars to appeal to *symphony* between the church and the state.² Explained in simpler terms, the symphony between the Russian church and the Russian state implied joint legitimization but at the same time a conflux between these two institutions in such a close way that it would be hard to differentiate the institutions from one another, in that, from a theological point of view, they formed a quasi-eschatological entity. However, during different periods of Russian history different monarchs would empower or disempower the church as a competitive institution with vast portions of land ownership and decision-making capacity.³ One of the famous examples of such “anticlericalist” sovereigns was Peter the Great, as we will see in the first chapter of this thesis, but Peter the Great was not the only Russian sovereign that would go against the hardliner church members in order to appease other groups. For example, Alexander I would be relatively loyal towards the Molokan community.⁴

Peter I’s decision to limit the authority of the church with the creation of the Synod and similar ecclesiastical reforms has significantly decreased the influence of the clerical institution in the affairs of a newly forming imperial entity. Even the famous historical anecdote of Peter the Great melting church bells into bronze for his cannons, an element of popular knowledge about Peter the Great’s reign, is very illustrative, given the idea that previously the church property and the richly

² Adalberto Mainardi, “Conflicting Authorities. The Byzantine Symphony and the Idea of Christian Empire in Russian Orthodox Thought at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *Review of Ecumenical Studies Sibiu* 10, no. 2 (August 1, 2018): 170–85; In this context, the term “crisis” does not necessarily presume a national disaster but more often a subject of debates within the state and around it. This necessitates a need to legitimize the rule of the monarchic sovereign through the holy scripture while simultaneously explaining eschatological ultraworldly realms of power such as the “Kingdom of God” or the view of the Messiah Jesus Christ as a king.

³ For the competition between Church and state in the early developments of the Muscovite state, see Matthew P. Romaniello, *The Elusive Empire: Kazan and the Creation of Russia 1552-1671* (Madison, 2012), 3-18.

⁴ The Russian empire remained a Christian state throughout its existence and thus the word “anticlericalist” here can only be understood relative to other Russian sovereigns who did not assess or scrutinize the authority of the church due to personal beliefs or political reasons (even though there were monarchs with arguably antagonized position towards the Orthodox priests such as Peter III, who reigned from January to July of 1762, for example).

and extravagantly ornamented church bells, some of which more of a work of art rather than an alarm utility, was considered untouchable. A plethora of economic, political, theological and social issues made it more difficult to establish a “proper” symphony for the state. The many schisms of the Eastern Orthodox church also related to the attempts of Symphony construction, or rather displayed the failure of the state and the Church to establish a unified monopoly. Just as much as the Russian church and state were full of different factions with different interests and beliefs, the “ordinary” people and local Spiritual Christian leaders, such as Simeon Uklein (1773-1809) for instance, had a vision of their own about politics and the religious experience.⁵

Against this background, studying the place of the Molokans in the Russian empire, the objective of this thesis is to take a nuanced, critical approach in order to provide new perspectives and evidence. Therefore, a thesis that compares how the Molokans viewed themselves against the imperial perspective can help to show convergencies and divergencies, opening up a space to study other religious conflicts in other historical contexts. Even on the superficial level, there were a lot of religious precepts that could be compared. Unlike Eastern Orthodox Christians, the Molokan sect does not recognize liturgy or iconography, it does not recognize the Eucharist in the literal sense but only in the spiritual sense. The Molokans accept the Trinity but reject Mariology. They have elders but otherwise reject clerical and monastic hierarchy.⁶ It was the Molokans who evolved into a separate group from the Orthodox Christians in Russia, however by the XIX century the division had been made clearly due to steep differences in how a “good Christian” should view the holy tradition. What further convoluted the matters was the 1830 Expulsion Act, which forced the sectarian population of the Russian empire to relocate to the Caucasian region immediately.

⁵ Livanov, Fedor. *Raskol'niki i ostrozniki: Ocerki i raszkazy*. Vol. 2. Chan, 1872.1:289.

⁶ See Chapter I; Shashin, *Missionerskaya Poyezdka Na Kavkaz*; Livanov, *Raskol'niki i Ostrozhniki*.

In the secondary literature, it was thanks to scholars such as T. Breyfolge, A. Gurer, O. Andreeva, C. Mammadov, and A. Kalantar for providing both invaluable ethnographic and theological insights into the Molokan community, as well as their lifestyle and the chronological order of their settlement.⁷ It must be noted that G. Chukrai wrote an useful work on the rise and decline of apocalyptic sentiment among sectarians, portraying the dynamic and fluidity of religious ideology on the periphery.⁸

The scholarly literature on the Molokan community has built a strong foundation for the present scholarship but is in need of an update that accommodates new imperial history, characterized by the so-called “imperial turn”.⁹ There are two main axes of general thought and conceptual understanding of this community that could benefit greatly from the deeper nuances provided by present thesis. The first stereotypical notion among many Azerbaijani scholars on the matter is that the Molokan community was isolated. This position, argued by of Azerbaijani and non-Azerbaijani scholars, has room for nuance.¹⁰ For example, O. Andreeva claims that the Caucasian Molokan community was “separated” (*obosoblennoye*) from the rest of the Russian and Caucasian population from the XIX century into our days.¹¹ A. Antadze follows in a similar way. While he does not explicitly say that the Molokans were hermetically sealed in their communities due to their social and theological precepts about the world, he significantly underplays the actual social

⁷ Nicholas B. Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (Cornell University Press, 2005); Banu Gürer and İrade Tağıyeva, “Çar Rusya'sının Din Politikasında Kafkasya Ruhaniliği,” *Din Araştırmaları Jurnalı* 2, no. 3 (2019): 173–86; Julia O. Andreeva, “Molokan Religious Community in Modern Armenia,” *History, Archeology and Ethnography of the Caucasus* 17, no. 3 (2021): 735–50; Ceyhun Mammadov, “Çar Rusiyası Dövründə Azərbaycanca Dövlət-Din Münasibətləri,” *Din Araştırmaları Jurnalı* 2, no. 3 (2019): 149–71; A. Kalantar, “Merinosy v Zakavkazye,” *Kavkazskoye Sel'skoye Khozyaystvo*, no. 206 (1897): 839.

⁸ Edele, Mark. *Stalinist Society: 1928-1953*. OUP Oxford, 2011, p.123.

⁹ Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin, “The Imperial Turn,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, no. 4 (2006): 705–12.

¹⁰ Banu Gürer and İrade Tağıyeva, “Çar Rusya'sının Din Politikasında Kafkasya Ruhaniliği,” *Din Araştırmaları Jurnalı* 2, no. 3 (2019): 3–5; Ceyhun Mammadov, “Çar Rusiyası Dövründə Azərbaycanca Dövlət-Din Münasibətləri,” *Din Araştırmaları Jurnalı* 2, no. 3 (2019): 6; Andreeva, “Molokan Religious Community in Modern Armenia;” Antadze, “Molokans in Georgia.”

¹¹ Andreeva, “Molokan Religious Community in Modern Armenia,” 738.

impact those groups had. Gurer, Taghiyeva, and Mammadov who were working on imperial Russian religious policy in the Caucasus also wrote of the Molokans in a traditional and reserved manner.¹² In this context, a “traditional and reserved” understanding of the Molokans revolves around imagining them as a strictly isolated or semi-isolated community. While it is true that the Molokans were isolated in some aspects, they were just as open in others, as this thesis will demonstrate. The emphasis will be put on this aspect of the Molokan community, as the scholarship and sources on the more isolationist side is plenty and will be used throughout this thesis as major works on the Molokans. This is important because the essentialization of an entire social group localized in the Caucasian region can obscure the agency these groups had in Russian imperial society on what was perceived to be the periphery.

The notion of isolation as a category to describe the Molokans seems plausible at first sight. Different authors have used different semantic definitions of “isolationism” to describe various homogeneous marriages (endogamy) and attitudes towards proselytization and inclusion of new members of the sect while ignoring day-to-day interactions with the outside world. The discussion on colonialism and how the Molokan community was jointly both victim of religious persecution and a supporter of colonial processes is the classical lens through which much of the scholarship has viewed this group.¹³ The problematic aspect of such an approach to the sectarian community studied in thesis is the fact that such views can miss the agency and stories of overcoming, persevering, and adapting to the static and dynamic pressures that existed in the Caucasian region

¹² Gürer and Tağıyeva, “Çar Rusya’sının Din Politikasında Kafkasya Ruhaniliği,” 7–8; Mammadov, “Çar Rusiyası Dövründə Azərbaycanca Dövlət-Din Münasibətləri,” 4.

¹³ See, for example, Nicholas B. Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia’s Empire in the South Caucasus* (Cornell University Press, 2005), 15; Nicholas B. Breyfogle, “Caught in the Crossfire? Russian Sectarians in the Caucasian Theater of War, 1853–56 and 1877–78,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2, no. 4 (2001): 3–9; Gürer and Tağıyeva, “Çar Rusya’sının Din Politikasında Kafkasya Ruhaniliği,” Mammadov, “Çar Rusiyası Dövründə Azərbaycanca Dövlət-Din Münasibətləri.”

under the imperial project of the Russian empire. The static pressures can be defined as a pressures that exists without periods of particular chronic outbursts with a start date and an end date but are more passive and ambiently present, such as the general fact of being surrounded by outsiders. Dynamic pressures can be understood as particular outbursts of violence or social change such as urbanization or the Russo-Turkish wars.¹⁴ Indeed, the Molokan settlements in the Caucasus were of strategic importance: the villages would provide garrison to the Russian imperial Army brigades, provide war logistics and be directly involved in fierce *frontier* skirmishes.¹⁵ The term *frontier* (also *borderland* or *periphery*) plays a particularly important role in the thesis and will be further discussed as an analytical category.

The comparison between the Molokan understanding of themselves and the imperial understanding of the Molokans thus also invites a comparison between the center and the periphery. Overall, it can be summarized that the existing literature on the Molokans sometimes falls into the cycle of assuming the Molokan community to be isolated and their activities in the Caucasus solely as a direct consequence of the colonial settlement project. This however does not answer the question of why it was specifically Caucasus that was chosen as an area of colonial sectarian settlement instead of Siberia and the Far East. That question is more or less answered in another work of Breyfogle that focuses on the military aspect of the Molokan settlements, where an argument is made about instrumentalizing this sectarian community for the purposes of national border security.¹⁶ In the best scenario, it is often assumed by these authors of varying backgrounds

¹⁴ A war is an obvious dynamic threat to any community due to killings, rape, and plunder of the people and villages, urbanization is also a threat to a homogenous community, as many of the members would leave to Baku city and cut all connections.

¹⁵ Breyfogle, "Caught in the Crossfire?," 9–11.

¹⁶ Breyfogle, "Caught in the Crossfire?"

that the Molokans were simultaneously the perpetrators of the colonial praxis and victims of harsh heresy purification programs of the Russian imperial entity.

This thesis studies perspectives of Russian state officials and members of the Orthodox Church about the Molokans as dissenting individuals and groups inside the recognized borders of the Russian empire, with particular preference given to the imperial actors that had first-hand experience with them (for example, travelers, book authors or missionaries). These perspectives and groups will be referred to as *the imperial perspectives* further in the text.

The imperial periphery and the imperial borderland are usually studied in the legal, administrative, military (geopolitical security of states, containment, and deterrence), or ethnic context. Besides the Caucasus, the Far Eastern part of the Russian empire is studied in the framework of the imperial borderland, even more illustratively.¹⁷ For example, Sergei Glebov wrote an extensive article on the subjecthood of people on the imperial borderland and how mosaic the administration and subjecthood in the Russian Far East was. Another article of his looks at another peculiarity of the borderlands, particularly regarding the Korean community or the Manchurian Wedge questions, which will be discussed in this section further. Russia is also not the only country in the world that had a compound religious disposition at its periphery, there was also scholarship from the other parts of the world in different timeframes. However, the topic of religion on the borderland in the Russian context is not as well-studied as in the West European or American contexts.¹⁸ For example, Luis León's book on the Mexican-American borderland religion introduces the idea that on the borderlands, religious resistance is based on "feel on the game" and "soul" instead of reason.

¹⁷ Stephanie Ziehaus, "The Manchurian Wedge: Settler Colonialism, Subjecthood, and Land Use in the Russian Imperial Far East," *Ab Imperio* 2023, no. 2 (2023): 49–80.

¹⁸ Glebov, "Between Foreigners and Subjects," Glebov, "Exceptional Subjects,"; Luis D. León, *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the US–Mexican Borderlands* (Univ of California Press, 2023); Stephanie Ziehaus, "The Manchurian Wedge: Settler Colonialism, Subjecthood, and Land Use in the Russian Imperial Far East," *Ab Imperio* 2023, no. 2 (2023): 49–80.

Leon enters a debate against Clifford Geertz, where Geertz presents religion as a cultural system, while Leon says that the borderland serves as a distorting mirror in which (Chicano) culture becomes a religious system. If one was to read the second chapter of this thesis and come back to this theoretical claim, they would find things to agree with both Leon and Geertz, since the Molokans connected their crafts, industries, diet with their religious outlooks. This will be important to keep in mind when applying various social conflict theories to explain the conflict between the Russian Orthodox, Molokan and Muslim groups, because before analyzing identity politics, one must determine at least a tentative identity, let alone the fact that the Caucasian Molokans had a dynamic and developing identity. This will be discussed further in the “methodological problems” section.

Before proceeding further, a working definition of religion and an imperial periphery/borderland needs to be proposed. This thesis uses the terms periphery and borderland synonymously in the context of Caucasus because it physically bordered other empires and was also distant from the “center” or “centers” of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Semantically speaking, the word “periphery” carries a diminishing, if not negative, connotation and has often been ignored in the scholarship. However, there has been a noticeable shift of interest in “the periphery” in highlighting the centrality of communities and social, political relations on state borders. Scholarship in Far Eastern studies, for example, has shown that the periphery was of central concern for the state in terms of border security. According to Ziehaus, fragility of subjecthood, and state control over society in the borderlands was a profoundly significant issue, thus making the periphery an important factor to consider as much as affairs in the center. Glebov agrees with Ziehaus in terms that too much attention has been given by scholars to Russian court intrigues as the main engine of the foreign policy and it ignores sometimes chaotic and anarchistic nature of regional development. As a

justification, he writes that the 1886 ban on Chinese and Korean settlements in the peripheral areas was a fiasco for the Russian center to enforce since the situation on the ground was too overwhelming for the frail borderland administration to rein in.¹⁹

However, it would be a mistake to assign to a periphery the essence of a poorly controlled area. An answer to the question of whether the imperial reach was stronger or weaker at the periphery compared with the center could go in different directions.²⁰ This dialectic dichotomy inherent to the center-periphery relationship stems from the fact that some aspects of the life of the periphery were monitored better than others for pragmatic reasons. For example, one could think of the military and criminal-legal (military courts) aspects of life in the Caucasus which were far stricter than in the center due to the strategic location of the territory on the crossroads with two hostile empires.²¹ In general, for present purposes, it is important to remember that areas of life, religious policies and statecraft varied in significance across center and periphery. What guides the analysis and choice of sources is the fact the life in the so-called periphery throws much light on questions of imperial governance and the place of religious groups in the empire. Therefore, this thesis

¹⁹ The word “overwhelming” in this context presupposes a hectic flow of events related to national and public order security that would happen often and require constant attention of the state officials or risk dealing considerable damage. For example, banditry of the borderland highwaymen, raids or smuggling that would happen and test out the capacity of the imperial police and garrisons; Fouad Makki, “The Empire of Capital and the Remaking of Centre–Periphery Relations,” in *After the Third World?* (Routledge, 2013), 3–5; Hendrik Spruyt, “Empires, Past and Present: The Relevance of Empire as an Analytic Concept,” in *Empire and International Order* (Routledge, 2016), 2–4, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315579313-3/empires-past-present-relevance-empire-analytic-concept-hendrik-spruyt>; Amy Turner Bushnell and Jack P. Greene, “Peripheries, Centers, and the Construction of Early Modern American Empires: An Introduction,” in *Negotiated Empires* (Routledge, 2013), 7; Glebov, *Between Foreigners and Subjects*; Ziehaus, *The Manchurian Wedge*.

²⁰ <https://api.taylorfrancis.com/content/chapters/edit/download?identifierName=doi&identifierValue=10.4324/9781315023038-2&type=chapterpdf>; Igor Torbakov, “Managing Imperial Peripheries: Russia and China in Central Asia,” in *The New Great Game*, ed. Thomas Fingar (Stanford University Press, 2020), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804797641-015>; Andrzej Nowak, ““Poor Empire or a Second Rome”—Temptations of Imperial Discourse in Contemporary Russian Thinking,” *The Polish Foreign Affairs Digest*, no. 3 (8) (2003): 2.

²¹ The Ottoman Empire would present a security risk to the Russian empire for the whole duration of both of these empires, however Iran would be eventually partially subjugated with Russia having exclusive trading rights and military presence in the capital of the Qajar dynasty at different periods of history; Mankoff, Jeffrey. *Empires of Eurasia: How imperial legacies shape international security*. Yale University Press, 2022.

embraces the dual nature of the periphery as a simultaneous place where the imperial control and gaze were jeopardized but also much more accented.

Thesis Structure:

This thesis is based on historical analysis combined with a comparative literature review regarding the previous scholarly debate on the Molokans, colonialism, imperial borderlands, and religion theory. It consist of an introduction, a chapter dedicated to Molokans discussing themselves, and a separate chapter for the imperial perspectives on the Molokans. The first chapter surveys a Molokan prayer book compiled in 1906 that has in it a letter and a chronology of how it was discussed among the Russian elite. The second chapter includes books and witness records, as well as journey logs of a blind missionary, a famous artist, several statesmen and travelers who visited the Caucasus directly or worked with the archives and stories or criminal cases related to sectarian activity in the Caucasus. The conclusion then summarizes the points made in the previous chapters. By “an imperial perspective”, I understand the perspectives of Russian state-affiliated or state-sponsoring actors (sponsorship can be moral too, i.e. the artist Vereshiagin’s works that romanticize and heroize the Russian conquest of Central Asia). Some elements of the methodology and the theoretical framework have already been discussed and will be discussed further in this and the following chapters.

Sources:

For the first chapter, I am using the letter written by the Molokan community to Tsar Alexander I and the 1906 prayer book collected by M. Kalmykov that contains detailed descriptions of Molokan rituals and prayers. To be precise, the preface of the prayer book by M.Kalmykov is prefaced by the letter, so the two sources are quoted simultaneously by the same reference and are best understood together. One of the other sources in the second chapter emerges in the context of environmental history, tracking the population of *merinos* sheep in the Caucasus because this breed

was brought to Caucasus by the Molokans and its cultivation can correspond to Molokan economic prosperity or decline, which influences dietary choices and social harmony of the community. The source materials span a period of ca. 100 years; the earliest dated 1805, the latest was published in 1906. This allows for a long duration analysis – within the limits of an MA thesis – of how the sectarian community evolved throughout different periods of Russian history, in some cases it is even possible to restore the chronological order and periodization of persecution and “periods of liberalization” towards the schismatics. Yet, different periods of Molokan history of persecution have different specifics, and are difficult to trace, influencing as they did religious life of these communities, including but not limited to surges in apocalyptic sentiment among the sectarians in the 1830’s, for example.²² Nevertheless, it can be said in defense of this chosen strategy that on average cultural and theological precepts of a studied society take longer time to accelerate its change and adapt to new reality, in some cases this rigidity is more apparent than in others. Making an analysis and considering the larger debate framework about the way that the periphery of the empire could provide a brand new chance for a sect to live according to their actual beliefs away from the influence of the imperial center, such rise in the apocalyptic beliefs, it can be surmised, can be connected to the act of expulsion and use it to explain how the worldly dimension was expected to soon be over making way for heavenly dimension.

In the third chapter, a book by A. Shashin is analyzed. Shashin was a blind missionary who had a missionary expedition to proselytize among the sectarians of the Caucasian megaregion and started

²² Grigorii Chukhrai, “Apocalypse, Dialectics and the Weather,” *Stalinist Society: 1928-1953*, 2011, 123; J. Eugene Clay, “The Woman Clothed in the Sun: Pacifism and Apocalyptic Discourse among Russian Spiritual Christian Molokan-Jumpers,” *Church History* 80, no. 1 (2011): 109–38; A. I. Klibanov, “Problems of the Ideology of Peasant Movements (1850s-1860s),” *Russian History* 11, no. 2/3 (1984): 187.

his journey in the Russian city of Vladikavkaz where he attended several Molokan meetings and had two extensive debates on two separate occasions with the Molokan sectarians.

Methodology:

The first chapter is going to provide a critical analysis of a letter to Emperor Alexander I by the Molokan elders who requested permission to codify and publish a prayer book, or “*molitvennik*”, for the sectarians. While having the clear intent to persuade the tsar, the letter follows the religious correspondence etiquette of that time and begins with a long introduction to Christianity, mentions Jesus and saints such as St. Paul or St. Jeremiah, but not the others. Moreover, the articulate choice of words and phrases in addressing the Russian sovereign and describing the brutalities committed by the imperial regime towards the sectarians shed the light on many political and theological factors that existed for the Molokan community. The letter to royal people would go through several layers of censorship, so it would be naïve to assume that space and position dedicated to describing the saints and cosmological processes such as God creating Earth were unintentional. My methodology includes a close-reading and interpretation of this letter, analyzing it as deeply as possible to understand which values and virtues were especially important to the Molokans themselves, at least as presented in the letter.

For the second chapter I plan to use Georg Simmel’s *in group* and *out group* theory. Georg Simmel was a German sociologist who specialized on urban modern transformation of society and the social conflict. He defined an *in group* as a group of people who share a feeling of solidarity and belonging as well as some kind of religious or cultural common identity. At the same time, an *out group* is a group of people that is seen as hostile, adversary or heretic. Modernization brought technological and economic, as well as institutional changes to the way that people interacted with each other and with the state. It is true that most Molokans at that time did not live in big cities

like Baku and most of my sources are related to rural areas which does not follow Simmel's accent on urban transformations. However the Molokan transformation and survival phenomenon is very much happening in the context of modernization in the Russian empire. This is why his theory must be adapted for the needs and special peculiarities of the Russian state and society. Moreover, in much more low-density rural areas some of these processes of in-group and out-group formation will look differently from how things happen in a large urban center.

The justification for using Simmel's categories is that his emphasis on the social conflict has already been extensively used in explaining racism and anti-Semitism.²³ Another important aspect of the methodology is the critical comparative reading of the prayer book and the debate between the orthodox missionary and the Molokan elder in that these two written sources contradict each other in terms of defining some theological precepts of the Molokan community, for example, its relation to the *Theotokos*, with one source claiming the birth of Christ by Mary and the other by God the Father. Such contradictory positions in the source materials form an important aspect of the present thesis. As it will be explored in the following chapters, the reasons for such discrepancy might stem from pragmatic reasons, the epistemic partiality of the authors or a much more fragmented state of the Molokan community than previously imagined.

Methodological Problems:

The greatest problem in the sources is that the comparison between sources produced by members of the Molokan community and sources representating the imperial perspective cannot be symmetrical because of the time discrepancy between the emergence and publication of these sources. The letter to Alexander I was written at the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the notes of the imperial travelers to the Caucasus almost exclusively related to the end of the

²³ Yuri Slezkine, "The Jewish Century," in *The Jewish Century* (Princeton University Press, 2011), chap. 1.

nineteenth- and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The problem lies in the fact that the Russian empire had witnessed many reforms and changes in administrative, legal, economic, and military aspects during this time, for example changes made in the recruitment system, as well as the abolition of serfdom in 1861. The advantage however lies in the fact that while the letter mentioned in the beginning of the prayer book was sent in 1805, the book itself was introduced into publication almost a century later. In order to justify my choice of sources, I would like to argue that since the prayer book deals with theology and ritual, as well as Molokan cosmological and eschatological beliefs, it can be argued that it is safe to assume that on the fundamental level they would not undergo the kind of change that would render core aspects of their faith irrelevant. Since there were no patriarchs, priests or classically trained religious scholars among the Molokans, there would be no one who would have sufficient reputation and skills to amend/reform the religion itself and the Molokans would rely on what is written in the holy Bible instead. Another issue is that Simmel's theory of ingroups and outgroups is much harder to differentiate when the compound element of identity comes into play. The Molokans were not just Molokans: language, location of expulsion ("Armenian" or "Azerbaijani" Molokans), and ethnicity intersected and created a much more complex identity, which makes it much harder to have essentialized ingroups and outgroups. On one side they were oppressed by the imperial regime just like Muslims. On the other, there were also ethnic Russians and due to their Christian nature, they might have enjoyed distinctive privileges compared to the Muslim outgroups. The ethnic identity could have thus coexisted with the obtained new geographic identity. In Simmel's definition, social groups are not only a manifestation of a person's desire for group identity it is also a battleground and the competition for resources, glory, recognition and land. However, this theory doesn't explain why

numerous instances of mutual cultural transfer (as discussed in Chapter II) occurred between Azerbaijanis and Molokans.

Chapter I: Molokan Self-Perception

Having surveyed the historiography and discussed aspects about the center/periphery divide in the previous chapter, the present chapter turns to the theological aspects of life in Molokan communities. The chapter explains Molokan self-understanding through the primary source of the prayer book published by M. Kalmykov in 1905 and the 1805 collective letter from the Molokan community to Emperor Alexander I presented in the same book as a preface. Not much can be said or quoted about the author M. Kalmykov from available sources, about his social class or his own beliefs. However, the fact that he was entrusted with such an important mission to publish a prayer book for a sect can indicate his high status and reputation. Kalmykov himself was connected with the official state apparatus. The book had been commissioned by the highest imperial authority. In the introduction of this book the author maintains the original orthography of the Molokan letter to Alexander I with all of the grammar mistakes and specifics of personal use of Russian language. The fact that an imperial official publisher did not dare to edit or censor even something as trivial as grammatical errors or the discrepancy between the two writing styles (the worldly and religious) raises interesting questions: it might suggest that this particular written source reflects a Molokan position and indicates a “liberalization” towards the Molokan community in the early XX century, which can be compared to the thaw towards the Molokans during the rule of Alexander I himself. The letter was to be presented to the Tsar and its council, so it would be reasonable to suggest that several editors had read the letter before forwarding it to the imperial court. On the other hand, another way to look at the interpretation of it could be the negligence of the censors. The negligence scenario is possible but unlikely considering the amount of scrutiny the interaction with royal addressees could generate in the early XIX century.

This is important to understand because this once again adds nuance to what was previously viewed as a rigid dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed. This also complicates the narrative of the Symphony construction between the church and the state in the Russian imperial project, because a state allowing heterodox heresy freedom from scrutiny can risk jeopardizing the relations with the main church. However, as the letter is read, the chronological history of the Molokan persecution reveals itself and is compared by the Molokans to the initial treatment of the Christians by the Romans. The letter makes this comparison explicit and leaves little space for a different interpretation.²⁴ The early Christians often ascended into the divine ranks of the saints and martyrs as they remained resilient under the threats of torture and death by the forces of the Roman Empire.

Other scholars have not frequently cited this written source. Unfortunately, there are not many sources available written by the Molokans about the Molokans. The prayer book in question began with a preface that contained a reference to the letter of the Molokans and a chronicle of how the decision had been made to publish the prayer book with the letter as the preface.²⁵ All the listed decisions made the prayer book an optimal primary source to base a chapter on. With the right amount of effort, even one written source can present a microcosm of the past or at least one of its dimensions in a way that is presentable to the broader public and the scholarly community. Therefore, this is how this thesis justifies the choice of a source for this chapter. The letter in question officially positions itself as a request (*proshenie*). Unlike several other chapters, this chapter is not divided into subsections because it works with just one primary source, and the critical analysis is done immediately wherever applicable. As a complement to the personal

²⁴ "...How in the past, there were martyrs in the days Diocletian the king-emperor of the Greeks or the Roman Caesar Docius." (...kak v drevnosti bylo mucheniki vo dni Dekliana tsarya imperatora Grecheskogo ili kesarya Dokiya tsarya Rimskogo); Kalmykov, M. S. "Molitvennik i obryady dukhovnykh khristian (molokan)" (1906), 9.

²⁵ M. S. Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 1906, 9.

analysis of the use of language and historical and theological metaphor/allegory, an excerpt from a Molokan newspaper from 1906 was quoted below to show the Molokan relation to the interpretation of the Bible. Unfortunately, this other source was unavailable in full edition and thus can only exist on the fringe of this thesis as an additional confirmation of what one could infer from the prayer book by itself.

The letter is addressed to Emperor Alexander I from the group of entrusted (*poverennye*) Spiritual Christians ²⁶ The group consisted of tradesmen (*meshchane*) Peter Juravtsov from the Bersaglebskiy *uezd* of the Tambov governorate, Maksim Losev, and Matvey Matylyov from Novokhipersiy *uezd* of the Voronezh governorate.²⁷ The letter begins with the affirmation that the Molokans have inherited their religion from their ancestors and have since then made efforts to keep it secret. However, they affirm that they believe in God the Father who holds and creates everything (*Otets-Vsederzhitel' Tvorets*), claiming to be the keepers of the true faith (*istinnaya vera*). It must be noted here that in the Russian language the word *istinniy* can semantically carry a much more profound and even ontological essence, implying more strongly that other confessions are not of the right faith.²⁸ They also claim to believe in *creator spiritus* or *jivotvoryashiy dukh* which is the source of all animate and inanimate entities in the universe, a substance out of which the souls are formed. After that, the letter becomes much more chronological and starts the narrative of how the “seed of Abraham” journeyed from Mesopotamia to Egypt and suffered four hundred years of slavery.²⁹ In the letter, they affirmed that the Molokans

²⁶ it is not specified in the text itself what it exactly means to be an untrusted person especially in the community that has no official hierarchy, although it can be argued that those people held exceptional knowledge of the Scripture, were able to write and read exceptionally good and had the popular support and the reputation among the sectarian community; Kalmykov, Molitvennik, 1906.

²⁷ Every Russian village and town was a part of an *uezd* administrative unit and several *uyezds* what constitute a governorate or a gubernia

²⁸ (*Istinniy*, n.d.) Dal', V. I. (2012). *Illyustirovannyi tolkovyy slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo yazyka*, 133.

²⁹ “...Semeni Avraamu, byvshim v Mesopotamii i v Egipte...”, Kalmykov, 4.

believed that Jesus Christ was given birth to by the Holy Mary, which contradicts the position of the sectarian Molokan that debated with Shashin and affirmed that Christ was given birth by God the Father.³⁰ This leaves the reader with a dilemma that either one of these two sources is either incomplete or poorly nuanced about the beliefs of the Molokan sect or about a misunderstanding between the center and periphery.³¹ While this letter can be trusted, the analysis must be realistic. It must be considered that they needed to win the sympathy of Alexander I by any means necessary, even if that meant making their beliefs sound closer to what was considered an acceptable norm by the clerics and the monarchs of that time. This will be discussed again in the next chapter, taking a closer look at the debate itself. Such a shift in the language may perhaps be explained in the context of the dire need of the Molokans to somehow call the attention to the ongoing violence and persecution against them.

According to the letter, the *dukh zhivotvoryashchiy* exists alongside God the Father and his son Jesus Christ, the source of knowledge is the holy scripture also known as the Bible which was given directly from God to the seed of Abraham.³² Also, according to the letter, the Molokans believed that the path to God and divine communications was initially linked exclusively to prophets like Abraham and Moses before Jesus Christ revealed itself to the public and through his sacrifice opened the path to God to everyone equally. Making an analysis of this information, it can be justified why the Molokans had issues with the clergy claiming prerogative in transmitting

³⁰ Shashin, A. *Missionerskaya Poyezdka Na Kavkaz*, 1894, p. 7-8.

³¹ even prior to the Expulsion Act of 1830, the Spiritual Christian sectarianism was not essentially popular in truly large cities of the Russian empire such as Saint Petersburg or Moscow but arguably remained a dominantly rural or semi-rural movement, this is why it can be argued that the Molokan movement existed on the peripheries ever since its conception. However, after the expulsion, they were moved even further from the center; from the “semi-periphery” of Central Russia into the “real” periphery; Nicholas B. Breyfogle, “The Possibilities of Empire: Russian Sectarian Migration to South Caucasia and the Refashioning of Social Boundaries,” in *Migration and Membership Regimes in Global and Historical Perspective* (Brill, 2013), 5–6.

³² “but we believe in God and the Father Almighty the Creator and in his only begotten Son Jesus Christ our Lord and in the life-giving Spirit, who is from the original Father, as he explains to us in the Holy Scriptures” (“no my veruyem v Boga i Ottsa Vsederzhitel'ya Tvortsa i v edinorodnogo Syna ego Iisusa Khrista Gospoda nashego i v Dukha zhivotvoryashchego, kotoryy ot ottsa iskhodnogo, o chem iz'yasnyayet nam v Svyashchennom Pisanii”), Kalmykov, M. S. “Molitvennik i obryady dukhovnykh khristian (molokan)” (1906), 3-4.

the divine will: it contradicted the precept that everybody was equal in the eyes of God ever since the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As will be evident further in the letter, this emphasis on the holy scripture was unwelcome by the church and the local authorities that considered it harmful for the regular people to read the holy scripture by themselves.

Juravstov, Losev, and Matylyov affirmed the Russian sovereign that their forefathers managed to hide the secret of this true faith from the Romanov monarchs since the time of the reign of Tsar Aleksey Mikhaylovich, however, in their contemporary times, it was no longer possible due to outbursts of violence and lawlessness. They informed the emperor that every time they would gather and read the Bible, they would become subject to various forms of obstruction ranging from verbal reprimand to expulsion, imprisonment, food deprivation, forced conscription, separation of children from families, jail, slavery and torture.³³ The precise allegory that is used here in this part of the text is the comparison of the Molokans themselves as the martyrs tormented by the Roman emperor Diocletianus, infamous for his repressions of Christianity in early IV century.³⁴

The letter contains a daring political statement that reflects the attitude of the Molokans to secular authority.³⁵ It stresses that God and only God can be called and crowned as the king of the world and the force behind the historical process and historical progress.³⁶ The quoted excerpt also referred to God as the only engine that could accelerate the race of man from the world of the mortals into the world of the immortal. On the next page, the letter starts to appeal to the activity of twelve apostles and how they proselytized Christianity even at mortal peril and until the end of their lives. It is said that the twelve apostles have written a great gift for humankind: the four good

³³ Kalmykov, *Molitvennik i Obryady Dukhovnykh Khristian (Molokan)*, 9.

³⁴ Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 9.

³⁵ Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 5.

³⁶ “Angels are good advisors and God is the firm Lord and Prince of all the World and Father of the Future Century” (“Angel chuden sovetnik, Bog krepkiy vlastelin i knyaz’ mira, Otets budushchego veka”). The future century in this context can mean both the historical calendar century and in the sense of age of humans on Earth ending and starting in Paradise. Kalmykov.

news (“chetyre blagovestiya”)³⁷ of the Gospel, Acts of Holy Apostles, the seven epistles, the works of Paul, and eventually the Bible compiled into one by St. John which was later translated by seventy-two interpreters into Latin and Greek and eventually ended up in prince Vladimir’s realm, where it however remained unattended until the reign of Yaroslav:

“...And Paul the Apostle, like a winged eagle, flew around the entire universe and enlightened the entire tribe of languages with his teaching and completed his epistle; and Saint John examined and put together into one covenant the commonly called Bible, which was given and translated by Plato, the king of Egypt, through seventy-two God-wise interpreters to be translated into Greek and Latin... And the Grand Prince Vladimir, upon accepting the Orthodox faith, brought him many books, looking for them, including this Holy Book...”³⁸

This excerpt requires clarification due to the confusing merging of distinct historical and legendary traditions in the letter. The story of the seventy-two translators, originally tied to the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (the Septuagint) around 250 BCE, has no direct connection to later Christian compilations of the Bible involving figures like St. John. The mention of St. John compiling the Bible seems to be a distinct tradition, possibly unique to certain sects or interpretations. While the source claims that the 72 translators were responsible for translating the Bible into both Greek and Latin, historical accounts traditionally associate their work solely with the Greek Septuagint. Latin translations, such as the Vulgate by Jerome, emerged much later and are unrelated to the Septuagint translators.

³⁷ Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 6.

³⁸ “...A Pavel Apostol kak orel krylatyy, vsyu vseleennuyu obletel i vse plemya yazykov ucheniyem svoim prosvetil i v poslanii svoi sovershil; a Ioann svyatyy razsmotrel i vo edin zavet sovokupil obshche nazyvayemaya bibliya, kotoraya byla dadena i perevedena Platonom tsarem Egipetskim cherez sem’desyat dvukh Bogomudrykh tolkovnikov... A velikim knyazem Vladimirom po prinyatii pravoslavnoy very i prineseny im mnogiye knigi ishcha, gde v tom chisle siya Svyataya kniga.”, Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 5

Furthermore, the research for this thesis did not uncover evidence of a Latin translation's direct influence on the Molokan tradition, despite the claims in the source. Similarly, no substantial direct connection between the Molokans and Mennonites has been established in the available literature.

According to the source, the original Bible was almost impossible to read due to the lack of punctuation and footnotes, and the simplification of the text could not be completed until the reign of Alexey Mikhailovich Romanov, when the 1563 Ostroh Bible was started to be mass printed in the cities and distributed.³⁹ After that, Peter the Great attempted to continue the works on proper translation but only his granddaughter Elizaveta Petrovna managed to succeed in this endeavor, continuing the printing. This tradition was continued by Catherine the Great as well. Such an excursion into history culminates with the affirmation that the Bible was a great gift to Russia but in none of its parts there was a mention of the need to illustrate or portray the sacred people or entities in the form of icons.⁴⁰ Also, the language of the letter continues to emphasize that the callouts to pray to saints and prophets specifically is redundant because of the omnipotence of the one true God, the same redundancy was present in crossing yourself as a way to cast off the dark energy.

The narrative abruptly transitions into the explanation of how the city mayors, the *zemstvo*⁴¹ *ispravniki*⁴², the noble and town administrators would order raids on all assemblies of the Molokans praying. The letter went into graphic detail to explain the torture and physical violence that state officials executed against them during those raids. In order to further legitimize their claims of having permission to read the Bible, the sectarians ask the same treatment that the

³⁹ Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 6.

⁴⁰ Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 8.

⁴¹ Zemstvo was a unit of local self-government in the rural territory with the majority of the officers being held by the nobles.

⁴² Ispravniks were chiefs of police force inside the uyezd territorial unit, each ispravnik reported to the governor.

Doukhobors received. For example, the Molokans wanted a permission to have two entrusted people near Tsar Alexander for religious questions. They also asked for repatriation and compensation in land in Tavriya. In the same way, the Molokans begged the tsar to “free them from the yoke of slavery introduced by Eastern Orthodoxy.”⁴³ This wording is particularly interesting and particularly offensive to the clergy, as the term “yoke” in the Russian language is semantically connected with memories and representations of the Mongol period (the “Mongol yoke”). The Orthodox clergy was factually compared with an invading Horde that arrived in the Molokan communities to collect tribute, raze houses, and wreak havoc.

Making an analysis of the letter’s text, one could conclude that metaphor, allegory, and comparison played a large part in how the Molokans self-identified and communicated. The skills of the Molokan elders to put words together were based on the high proficiency levels and present an interesting case of using rhetoric and hermeneutics as an instrument, showing the dialectic identification with both the victims of consequences and the masters of their own fate. This is important to understand because the ways communities communicate might reflect what they perceive themselves as and the ways they want to be represented to others. It also reveals what in their view they are not and what they might strive to be. From the many Biblical references, the Molokans made in this text, and from the connections made in the next chapter’s debate with the Orthodox missionary, it can be concluded that the Molokans paid extensive tribute to studying the scripture itself and giving tribute to God primarily through their spirit and zeal, and not the form. The method in which the Molokans interpret the Bible is allegorical and spiritual, which is also confirmed in the scholarship of other authors and the Molokans themselves.⁴⁴ This separates them

⁴³ “Osvobodite nas iz-pod iga rabstva pravoslavnoy religii i ot istyazaniy klevetov na nas, Kalmykov, Molitvennik, 11.

⁴⁴ “Dukhovnyy Khristianin, Molokanskaya Bogoslovskaya Shkola, 1906, № 2, sec. 2, 38; Aleksey Sergeyevich Chernov, “Inoskazaniye kak kharakternaya osobennost’ ucheniya dukhovnykh khristian-molokan, Vestnik Tambovskogo universiteta, Gumanitarnyye nauki, no. 7 (2012)

from the sect of Baptists, who interpret and insist on interpreting the Bible literally. The comparative analysis between the Molokans and the other sects will help the scholarly community understand better the specifics of the historical development of this branch of sectarianism. The comparison will be made in the next chapter.

The chronology of the Russian Imperial state office procedure immediately follows the letter. The procedure was about the monarchy's methods to respond to the letter and the debate on whether the Molokans should be permitted or prohibited from reading the Bible. The secretary of Alexander I, cavalry general Mikhail Mikhaylovich Speranskiy, delivered and read the letter out loud in front of the tsar and the advisors. Upon completion of the reading, Tsar Alexander I asked his advisors to speak out on the matter and received the first contribution from the field marshal *knyaz'* Mikhail Illarionovich Kutuzov-Smolenskiy who asked a rhetorical question of whether it was even possible to stop the light of the holy scripture from illuminating the people of the world.⁴⁵ Archbishop Ambrosius,⁴⁶ who was also among the advisors, confirmed that the holy scripture is as unstoppable as the moon and the stars in their movements and light. The final word, however, was after the Tsar who quoted the Bible itself and how Jesus Christ showed divine grace and mercy⁴⁷ to the people of Israel instead of brutal demands and ultimatums. Moreover, Alexander I stated that no amount of brutal treatment could sway the Dukhobors and the Molokans from their theological position, rhetorically questioning the effectiveness of his grandmother Catherine II and her policy

⁴⁵ Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 14.

⁴⁶ The concession to read the Bible from the Archbishop Ambrosius does not have to necessitate complete surrender to the ideology of freedom of conscience, i.e. it does not mean that the Russian Orthodox Church and the Archbishop himself would permit all kinds of heresies or install them in the same legal rights as the Russian Orthodoxy itself. It must also be remembered that at the time of the council assembly in response to the letter the Church still hasn't recovered from reforms that tamed their authority.

⁴⁷ "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." ("Priydit'e ko mne vse truzhdayushchiyesya i obremenennyye i ya uspokoyu vas; voz'mite igo moye na sebya i nauchites' ot menya; ya krotok i smiren serdtsem, to obryashchete pokoy dusham vashim"), Matthew 11:28-30, Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 15.

choice regarding the persecution of the Molokans. However, the language of the “imperial perspective” is still about the return of the schismatics under the “influence of the Orthodox church.”⁴⁸ The discussion on the imperial perspectives is convoluted and will be covered in the next chapter.

The holy scripture was not cited in vain. Emperor Alexander I ordered a manifesto in which it was decreed to send a message to all civil and military governors to bestow upon the Molokans freedom from persecutions and hindrance, including corporal punishment. The latter was exclusively attributed to those Molokans that were conscripted into any kind of imperial service, i.e., the military service. The freedom from persecution conveniently came with the order to standardise the way Molokans interact with the sacred and thus it was also ordered to compile a prayer book that would accommodate the vessel of sectarianism in the unfriendly sea of Russian Orthodoxy. A victory was won by the sectarians and a chance to have their own prayer book compiled was presented. Moreover, Juravtsov was invited to the palace on July 17 of 1805 to interpret and explain the rituals, the singing of psalms, the way the Molokans interacted with and interpreted the Bible. Overall, this meant that the Molokans were given treatment comparable to that of the Dukhobors on the matters of their freedom to practice their religion.

Juravtsov was given the right to explain and demonstrate their beliefs and rituals right in front of Emperor Alexander I. He started by reaffirming the sect’s firm belief in the Word of God and the infallibility of all the books inside of it that need to be studied as profoundly as possible to obtain salvation.⁴⁹ As for the essence of God, the Molokans were trinitarian and believed that God was

⁴⁸ Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 15.

⁴⁹ “Vse knigi onoy my priyemlem nesomnenno s blagoveniyem i po silam svoim pouchayemsa dlya svoego spaseniya...”, Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 21

not created or subordinate to any force in the universe, God had three beginnings and three hypostases:

“We believe and heartily confess that God is one in essence in three persons, inseparable: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This triune and three-hypostasis God does not depend on anyone, he did not originate from anyone, but he exists on his own.”⁵⁰

This trinitarian differentiation however becomes more complicated when the Molokan elders explained that God the Son descended from the heavens by the descension of the Holy Spirit, making it more difficult to distinguish one from the other:

“This Savior was not like anything else, but like the only-begotten Son of God, who, according to the fulfillment of the given times, left the sky with the Council of God; He came to earth with the coming of the Holy Spirit, which we do not understand, he was incarnated by the Most Holy Virgin Mary, he became a *God-man*.”⁵¹

These two quotes show that, at least in the letter, the Molokans aligned themselves with the dogmas established by the Ecumenic Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. These two excerpts can be considered in tension with Shashin’s account. The term *God-man* or *Bogochelovek* can suggest thus a dyophysite nature of the Molokans. The divine and human essence existed in Jesus Christ simultaneously and without conflict, he was full god and full man at the same time, thus the term used. It was important for the scholarly community to understand if they wished to provide a profound contextual analysis of the sectarian group along other adjacent (in spirit or historical/geographic contexts) non-orthodox groups. Juravtsov’s ability to describe this and the following precepts of the Molokan faith to the listeners in their roadmap of integrating the Molokans’ view into the written codified book reinforces the historical credibility and precision

⁵⁰ “My veruyem i serdechno ispoveduyem chto Bog est’ edin po sushchestvu v trekh litsakh nerazdelen: Otets i Syn i Svyatyy Dukh. Sey triyediny i triyepostasnyy Bog ni ot kogo ne zavisit, ni ot kogo ne proizoshel, no sam po sebe sushchestvuyet”, Kalmykov, 22

⁵¹ “Sey Spasitel’ byl ni kak chto drugoye, no kak edinorodnyy Syn Bozhiy, kotoryy po ispolnenii predostavlennyykh vremen, Sovetom Bozhiyem ostavil nebo; prishel na zemlyu Soshestviyem Svyatogo Dukha, kotoryy dlya nas ne postezhim, voplotilsya ot Prehistoy Devy Marii, sodelalsya Bogochelovekom.”, Kalmykov, 22

of this source in terms of reflecting Molokan self-perception and religion. Juravtsov delivered the speech much earlier than the devastating year 1830, but the book was published much later, during the entrance of Russia into a new century. The time difference could have come from a general reluctance to fulfill this unpopular order in a way that would bypass meticulous censorship, difficulties of collecting data from a community exiled in a dangerous peripheral territory or from the period of the state oppression apparatus intensification during the reign of Nicholas I.

This chapter will continue by providing a review of the prayers and rituals described in Kalmykov's prayer book. It is formatted as a list of thirty articles or "*punkty*". The first two articles contained the first and second tables upon which the Ten Commandments were written with their full versions. The article that forbade creating handmade images of God, both in totem and in stone, followed.⁵² One could infer and analyze the importance of it to describe why the cross signs or icons were undesirable. According to article 6 of the prayer book, Molokans had to pray with the spirit in the house, with their faces turned to one another, which is different from the Eastern Orthodox method of the church flock looking at the priest. However, the Molokans weren't complete abolitionists of the church inventory, they venerated incense burning and thuribles (censers) used to dissipate the smell and thus the divine blessing.⁵³ Article 10 provides a nuanced understanding of the Eucharist as a symbol and stresses the importance of spiritual food over the physical by quoting John (6:27).⁵⁴ In the same way that John emphasized the spiritual and meaningful bread over the physical bread, the Molokans emphasized the meaning over the form.

⁵² "You shall not make for yourselves an image made with your own hands, nor a graven image, nor shall you set up for yourselves a pillar or a stone in our land to worship it; I am the Lord your God." ("Ne delayte sebe obrazov rukotvornykh, ni izvayanykh, ne stav'te sebe ni stolpa, ni kamnya v zemle nashey v oznamenovaniye togo, chtoby poklonyat'sya emu; Ya Gospod' Bog vash"), Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 27

⁵³ Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 30

⁵⁴ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval," John 6:27, Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 30

In this conception, an “allegorical” quality of the Molokan Bible interpretation process is extraordinarily strong.

According to the article 11 of the prayer book which quoted, among other verses, Jacob, the confessions were to be done to one another. This can be interpreted either as public or private confessions of different equal members of community to one another.⁵⁵ In the next chapter information will be presented about a sinful sectarian woman confessing to a Molokan elder through a mail letter, which implies a particular weight of the elders. Even though the Molokans didn't have a traditional monastic and priestly hierarchy, some people would nevertheless have their age grant them a powerful kind of moral authority. Article 23 quotes Peter in order to mobilize integrity principles among the Molokan elders and call the “flock” to demand the principles of integrity from the elders.⁵⁶ Article 13 emphasized the role of baptism in the water and how John used to baptize people in the river, however no concrete instructions are given about whether babies or adults should be baptized. Nevertheless, from other sources information can be found that in the beginning of XIX century a group of “watery” Molokans (*vodnyye molokane*) would spawn.⁵⁷ “Watery” Molokans believed in adult baptism as a conscious choice at a later stage in life. This Molokan movement would later evolve into the Russian Baptist church.⁵⁸

Another unexpected verse to be cited in the prayer book permitted or at least partially legitimized exogamy and marriage with non-believers, which is something that the Molokans stereotypically

⁵⁵ “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed,” Jacob 5:16, Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 30

⁵⁶ “Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve, not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”, Peter 5:2-3; Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 41

⁵⁷ Yuliya Grigor'yevna Matushanskaya, Valeriya Anatol'yevna Samatova, and Yuliya Tikhonovna Tulyanskaya, “Vklad Molokanskikh Idey i Diskursa v Formirovaniye Rossiyskogo Protestantizma v Xix v.,” 13 13, no. 6 (2020): 142–45.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

never did or have never approved of.⁵⁹ This creates another complication in understanding the Molokan theology and the need to explain the rift between the acts and the text. The two possible lines of analysis this thesis proposes is epistemic partiality of those authors who wrote of the Molokans as endogamous or, a better one, the prevalence of a cultural\traditional system of values over the religious system of values in the Molokan community.⁶⁰ Overall, both the ten commandments and the thirty articles were given in full quotation, each with a subtitle and covered many of theological and daily life topics from birth to marriage and burial, dealing with sins and even naming children. Only seldom were they annotated with direct instructions to the Molokans on how to live, which could potentially suggest room for maneuverable interpretation.

Continuing the topic of oppression, the Molokan perception of how to respond to divine injustice and state oppression can be inferred from the way that they pray. According to the prayer book, some prayers must be done on foot while others in the kneeling position. Psalm 114, which describes largely suffering and torture of those with the most virtue, is explicitly ordered to be repeated in the standing position of a confident believer and not in a more submissive kneeling position, which helps this thesis conclude courageous and confrontational sectarian mentality and theology, built on the precept of persevering. For reference, the content of the Psalm was:

“I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord “Lord, save me!” The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you. For you, Lord, have delivered me

⁵⁹ “To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy,” Corinthians 7:12-14; Kalmykov, 45-46; Aram Haytian, “The Molokans in Armenia,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 11, no. 1 (2007): 33–44; Antadze, “Molokans in Georgia,” 78.

⁶⁰ As presented in the previous chapter.

from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the Lord in the land of the living.”⁶¹

The way the Psalm is quoted is interesting because it is not quoted in full. This raises the question of why the Molokans chose to omit a large chunk of the Psalm. An answer can be given through analysis of the text itself. The omitted chunk of text in the Psalm 116 (or 114 in Russian-language psalters) has three main motives: sacrifice of a thank offering to Lord for all of his blessings in Jerusalem, the precious nature of death of Lord’s servants in the Lord’s eyes and the fact that a believer kept believing in God even when he could not trust anybody else.⁶² While the records from the state office responsible for media censorship in the Russian empire data is not available in open access, one might speculate that those lines propagating distrust would be too provocative in the context of a religious book.

The previous Psalm was ordered to be read standing, in a “strong” position. The Lord’s prayer and similar vital Christian prayers were likewise to be done in a standing position. However, the prayer 4 was to be done in the kneeling position. The lengthy prayer clearly resembled Ezra and the ninth chapter of the third book. The book described the exile from Israel in ancient history.⁶³ These painful events, albeit chronologically far, could have been easily used as parallels to the exile of the Molokans in the Caucasus.

In the Bible, Ezra responds to human injustice by pulling his hair and falling on his hands, he feels embarrassed for the sins of others. However, calling the previous prayer an “Ezra prayer” was a simplification, considering that the lengthy prayer in the book has taken chunks of text from both

⁶¹ It must be noted that due to confessional and standardisation differences Psalm 114 in Russian is equivalent to Psalm 116 in English editions of the Bible; Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 61.

⁶² The phrasing in “I believed, therefore have I spoken: I was greatly afflicted: I said in my haste, All men are liars” can easily be interpreted as perseverance in the case of complete anomie from the worldly social interactions and the lack of trust between, for example, the state officials and the Molokans, Psalm 116:10-19

⁶³ Kalmykov, *Molitvennik*, 49

Ezra 9:6-7 and Ezra 9:15.⁶⁴ The prayer itself is about the coming of an eschatological cosmic Judge that is going to assess and determine reward or punishment for the activity of humans on earth.

The letter of the community to the Russian tsar provides an extensive view into how the Molokan community saw the history of Christianity and their own history, as well as providing the context that was analyzed here for a better understanding of the sectarian theology and the way that they interacted with the imperial center. From the last paragraph, it was apparent that the sectarians, at least in the period of Alexander I, felt comfortable enough to present themselves as the victim of cosmic and worldly injustice. They used very antagonizing language against the Russian Orthodox Church, and they knew that it would have passed through several instances of imperial censorship. Another interesting detail was that the Molokans themselves wrote of their martyrdom and used language that was simultaneously pleading and daring in its undertone. This reading of Molokan sources may invite scholars to rethink the position of this community of faith in imperial formations between center and periphery.

Chapter II: The Imperial Perspectives on the Molokans

This chapter overviews the use of terms such as “sect” in sources representing the “official imperial” perspective, i.e. that of officials observing and describing the community, including views on the daily life of the Molokans in the Caucasus in the XIX century. This also includes perspectives on their diets, clothing, housing, etc. The externally recorded description of the Molokan economy, including farming, animal husbandry, donation-based social security network, and theological

⁶⁴ “I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens. From the days of our ancestors until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today.”

aspects can help understand better the place of the community in the empire and in imperial policy. It also allows an examination of the spiritual and social pillars that gave the Molokans the possibility to maintain their cultural traditions in their environment. The previous chapters have already elaborated on some of the pressures on the community, such as the initial hostility of the locals and a shift in the economic and demographic fabrics of the industrializing Baku gubernia. It is important to remember that due to the shortage of records compiled by the Molokans themselves, the picture that emerges – nesting between self-perception/description and external observation by imperial officials – is necessarily assymetric. The aim is to provide a perspective that should be assessed critically. It is striking that several, similar observations have been made by different travelers and preachers in the region. Based on sources representing the imperial gaze, the previous scholarship tended to privilege the imperial, intrinsically colonial perspectives.⁶⁵ This equally applies to the notion that the Molokans were isolated. The argument here is that those perspectives revealed levels of diversity and more complexity, as pointed out in other contexts by new trends in the “imperial turn”.⁶⁶

Conceptualizing Sectarianism

“Sect” as well as its derivatives (such as *sektanty* or “sectarians”) can often be interpreted as a category with encoded negative connotations and is often used to describe the Molokan community in the primary literature written by the Eastern Orthodox civil and clerical workers. Another word that quite often is used to generalize the communities such as Molokans and Doukhobors is “raskolniks” or “schismatics.” In the imperial statistics, such as census documents, in the headings,

⁶⁵ This thesis uses the term “imperial perspectives” in this and several other instances not to depict the opinions of the Tsar or the administrators in the high echelons of authority such as viceroys, but in a more encompassing sense, in which priests, ethnographers, artists (such as Vereshiagin) and others; Breyfogle, “Caught in the Crossfire?”; Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers*, 33

⁶⁶ David-Fox, Michael, ed. *Orientalism and Empire in Russia*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2006.; Alan Mikhail and Christine M. Philliou, “The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 4 (2012): 721–45.

it is possible to encounter the term “uklonyayushchiyesya” (“deviants”), as in, individuals or groups that “deviate” or “dodge” from the bosom of the Eastern Orthodoxy.⁶⁷ The controversy gets another facet from an anthropological point of view if the anthropological dimension comes into discussion. The Molokans are mentioned in sociologist Ernst Troeltsch's discussion on sects as a default example of a sect. They are described as the following: "A sect may, of course, have very varied and even contradictory views on the different spheres of life, and may not be committed to an absolute rejection of all other systems of thought or practices. In the case of the Molokans, for example, we find a combination of asceticism and rationalism, a dualistic cosmology with a strong eschatology and a firm belief in the Holy Spirit. Moreover, they do not advocate violence or revolutionary measures. On the other hand, they do reject the orthodox faith and the entire system of sacraments, and their rejection of secular morality goes so far as to make them the victims of government persecution".⁶⁸ He defines “sects” as groups that had separated from the main body of their initial religious community due to steep disagreements on theological and/or political issues. Applying this definition to the Molokan community, which had broken away from the Eastern Orthodox Church for reasons such as a belief that upon Judgment Day, both ethereal souls and physical bodies would resurrect. This is one example where the mainstream Orthodox Church disagrees with the Molokans, since the former is more inclined to believe in the exclusive resurrection of ethereal souls. Besides belief, ritual has always played a significant role in the Russian religious consciousness, at least for the majority, which was another point of concern for the Molokan schismatics.⁶⁹ It might seem at first glance that the rejection of ritual was an early modern invention following the people's disappointment with the clergy, at least because

⁶⁷ Pervaya Vseobshchaya perepis' naseleniya Rossiyskoy imperii 1897 g. (Bakinskaya guberniya.), 50.

⁶⁸ Troeltsch, Ernst. The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches. Page.102

⁶⁹ Livanov, *Raskolniki i Ostrojniki*, 1:153.

the most popular denominations that are opposed to rituals appeared during the Reformation and got relatively more scholarly coverage, one could think of the Puritans, Quakers, Anabaptists or Mennonites. Some of these communities would prohibit the followers from practicing Christian rituals or celebrating birthdays, Easter, and Christmas, especially in the way that the Orthodox Christians do. Despite that, the source claimed that the Molokan rejection of the ritual had been connected to the preaching of Monk Adrian in 1004 in Kievan Rus, a period much earlier than the Reformation movement in Western Europe gained prominence.⁷⁰ The metropolitans of Kiev had to deal with this monk and his followers for several generations. The typical strategy was to denounce and imprison the new spiritual leaders until they died or repented. This piece of information from Livanov's book shows that the tradition of denominational plurality and the questioning of the Orthodox traditions in Eastern Europe has profound roots in the pre-modern past.

While the Russian authors from the “center” used the term “sect,” it remained an exonym for the community that called itself Christian.⁷¹ This thesis uses the mentioned exonym to refer to the Molokan community solely in the context of constructing a narrative from the Russian imperial lens. Only a few sources, such as Yuzov, will refer to Molokans as Spiritual Christians.⁷² The situation with naming gets even more convoluted due to Yuzov referring to the Molokans as “dissidents” or “dissidenty”, which could hypothetically be used as an anachronistic comparison to the dissidents in the perestroika period in the Soviet Union. This term is not to be confused with “dissenters”, a relatively more universal term used to describe all kinds of heterodox beliefs and

⁷⁰ *Letopisnyy Sbornik, Imenuemyy Patriarshey Ili Nikonovskoy Letopis'yu*, vol. 10 (Yaziki Russkoy Kulturi, 2000), 108.

⁷¹ Inikova, “The Dukhobor and Molokan Ethno-Denominational Groups”; Abdullayev, “The Role of Language within the Identity Structure of Molokans of Azerbaijan (on the Example of Rural Localities Ivanovka and Novosaratovka).”

⁷² I. Yuzov, *Russkie Dissidenty: Starovery i Dukhovnye Khristiane* (Typography of A.M. Kotomin, 1881), 4–6.

thoughts. This definition of the Molokans as a dissident group adds another point to using Troeltsch's definition of the Molokans as a sect.

Molokan Lifestyle, Views, and Existence as Viewed by the Imperial Perspectives

Besides the belief in a physical incarnation upon judgment day, the Molokans believe in the absolution of sin through non-conventional methods. While most Christians repent their sins in the direct vicinity of the priest, the Molokans practice confession through mail in the written form, as narrated by Fedor Vasilyevich Livanov.⁷³ Livanov was a writer who had graduated from a theological seminary and compiled five volumes of Molokan history, including detailed descriptions of both individual sectarian prophets and saints as well as the Molokan way of life. The work was compiled with the assistance of the archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, where Livanov had worked. While there are accusations of Livanov stealing considerable chunks of data from his fourth and third volumes from his colleagues and having the overwhelming majority of the fifth volume's copies physically destroyed for revealing state secrets, his work has caused great societal upheaval at the time, as he in several instances expressed respect to the Molokan community.⁷⁴ Although that respect was not unconditional; Livanov considered total abstention from sex and perpetual virginity valued among sectarians an uncalled-for and irrational concept, since in his opinion the compulsory celibacy eventually seduced the sectarians to fall into even deeper holes of vice out of natural desperation and frustration. Livanov cites the confession of one woman as evidence for his argument, although the benefits of the written mailing confession system are for the unity of the group. The woman sinner confesses in a letter written in Church

⁷³ True repentance for Molokans can only be received by God, however, the spiritual leaders can still be seen as people of trust and are capable to give certain counsel. The Molokan "priests" are different hierarchically from the Orthodox counterparts; Livanov, *Raskol'niki i Ostrozhniki*.

⁷⁴ Volumes one to four of "*Raskol'niki i Ostrozhniki*" have described the development of the sects from their birth in the XVIII century into the post-Napoleonic wars era. The fifth volume had a far more provocative essence, as it dealt with the periods of contemporary rule of Nicholas I and Alexander II.

Cyrillic (tserkovnyi poluustav) that she had kissed other men on festivities, breastfed alien babies, fantasized about how earthly women live with their spouses, interacted with men during group circle dances, engaged in fortune telling and seduced a priest.⁷⁵ Livanov claimed that the confession was much longer and contained too many obscene descriptions to be fully summarized. The gender aspect in the imperial perspectives on the Molokan lifestyle is fundamental: women from one side are shamed for their lust but on the other hand shamed when they resist their carnal desires. They had to maintain dignity but only in the “correct” form of dignity, which creates a double pressure on women both from the strict in-group seniors and also outgroup men who explain their religion on their behalf. However, gender norms were not the only restriction: the sectarians considered it abhorrent to use European goods such as saddles, participate in secular clubs, wear dresses, or attend horse riding competitions.⁷⁶ The Molokans have eventually grown away from such an exclusivist stance on total celibacy unlike some other radical sects, but the practice of confessions by mail persisted.⁷⁷ Returning to the utility of this method, one might notice how useful it proved to be, especially in the context of the Molokan community being forcibly expelled and scattered across the vast Caucasian highlands. It could be argued that sectarian reliance on letters in certain instances helped them survive and persevere in the predicament they had found themselves in following the exodus from Central Russia into the peripheries of the empire.

Despite having little regard for some of the Church rituals, Molokans exhibited a keen sense of communal loyalty that had impressed the outsiders. This reliance on social networks manifested

⁷⁵ Livanov, *Raskol'niki i Ostrozhniki*, 1:414.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 410

⁷⁷ As quoted in Iuzov (p.148), Molokans do not consider marriage a sacrament; love and mutual consent is a sacrament but not the ritual itself. For the Molokans, a masterfully conducted ritual cannot replace marital compatibility. Vice versa, a poor marriage will not be saved by an extravagant ceremony of marriage.

itself in an interesting occupational way: many Molokans worked as horse cart drivers and provided passenger rides for a taxed fee.

Another source provides useful insights. “*Missionerskaya Poezdka Na Kavkaz*” was a book written by a blind missionary A. Shashin, who was proselytizing Eastern Orthodox Christianity among the Old Believers, Muslims, and other religious groups, one of which was the Molokans. Operating horse carts and providing taxi rides could be regarded as a particularly social occupation since it required working with people of diverse backgrounds and personalities, in the form of haggling for the price of the road trip or recreational casual conversation to kill time en route. The argument that the Molokan community and all “othered” communities exist in hermetic isolation from the “rest” can be criticized when one considers all the spiritual and logistical institutions present at that time. The sectarians that had been separated by decrees of the tsar nevertheless maintained connections both through correspondence (including letters of confession) and work-related travel. It can thus be concluded that another reason for the Molokan survival as a community was the durability of the social networks with other Molokan settlements. A similar argument can be found in Slezkine’s work on Jewish history where he explains how “otherness” put the Jews in the position of a mediator in European society since the nobles saw them as non-partisan to familial or factional feuds of their own due to strict endogamy and lifestyle rules.⁷⁸

Moreover, another very important economic aspect of the sectarian activity as recorded in Sashin’s book was the fact that they had a common economic financial fund that existed thanks to donations. The fund was used to relieve the members of the community who needed help at any given moment.⁷⁹ The fund was not only used in emergencies of fellow sectarians but also to help the

⁷⁸ Slezkine, “The Jewish Century.”, 13-17.

⁷⁹ Shashin, *Missionerskaya Poyezdka Na Kavkaz*, 4.

orthodox people in the region in order to sway them towards sectarianism. This revelation simultaneously challenges the old narrative about isolation and unilateral coloniality. Simultaneously, it challenges the power dynamic between the Orthodox and the sectarian worlds.

Several aspects of the Molokan life are at the intersection of spiritual and material understandings of the world. Besides the already mentioned views on sex and gender and measures of transporting people and information, there is also a dietary dimension. Food and diet were important not only to recover nutrients for physiological existence but also an act of piety and a beacon of cultural connection with the Russian heartland. Molokans and Duhobors were deeply engaged in animal husbandry and introduced locals to potatoes, cabbages, eggplants, and other cultures, as well as sunflower, hemp, and apocynum.⁸⁰ Two new cultures of wheat were introduced by the Molokans: Qirka and Arnautka.

The gastronomical exchange was not one-sided: they used the methods learned from Azerbaijanis to harvest traditional species of wheat in Azerbaijan such as sari bugda, qara qilciq and qirmizi bugda. Honey and grape production held the Molokans famous in the region and allowed them to trade with the local population, as well as enjoy grape and hives products on their tables. Molokan noodles were traditional food prepared for burials and weddings alike. Out of other dishes they preferred Kashniks and milk potatoes for ceremonies. These dishes symbolized humility and simplicity of the worldly life and superiority of the Hereafter. Animal husbandry, horse and sheep breeding were intensively developing among the sectarians. Molokan horses and Molokan carts were used on important imperial logistical nodes. The Molokan horse was a special breed of horse with strength and stamina that allowed the Molokans to transport materials before the Caucasian

⁸⁰ Vereshchagin, V. V. "Dukhobortsy i molokane v Zakavkaz'ye, Shiity v Karabakhe, Batchi i opiumoyedy v Sredney Azii, Ober-Amergau v gorakh Bavarii: Rasskazy." Moskva: Tipo-lit. t-va IN Kushnerev i K (1900), 21–42.

railroad was constructed and allowed for simpler traffic of people and goods, while the Molokan merinos was a type of newly-bred sheep optimal for the Caucasian climate, as per the article of A.Kalantar.⁸¹ An Armenian agricultural scientist Avetis Hayrapeti Kalantar (1859-1937) wrote a contribution studying the merinos sheep in Azerbaijan and Transcaucasia.⁸² Due to their extended growth in Azerbaijani villages, one could argue that the Molokans who were particularly fixated on the merinos husbandry also had a chance to stimulate their own sources of income and gain access to wool and meat of the merinos. Unfortunately, a further analysis of Kalantar's work was not possible as it is not available in the full format. Nevertheless, it shows that the Molokans even managed to breed a new type of sheep with a specific kind of thin wool useful for the Caucasian terrain and climate.

Based on Vereshiagin's and Kalantar's accounts of Molokan-Azerbaijanis exchanges, it can be concluded that Kalantar believed in the coexistence of the Molokans and Azerbaijanis due to gastronomic exchanges and economic harmonization.

The in-between-the-lines conclusion one could detect in the imperial perspectives on the Molokans is that according to sources discussed above, Molokans adapted well in the Caucasus because their religious and cultural foundations were strict enough to keep them away from decadence and hedonism (the belief in physical reincarnation in the Judgment day made them treat their bodies and health with discretion) but agile enough to find creative solutions to problems they faced after their forced expulsion, with the overall perception of the Molokans remaining on a gradient spectrum between respect and romanticization and condescending contempt. Furthermore, even the imperial observers themselves as well as the bearers of such perspectives accommodated a

⁸¹ Kalantar, A. "Merinosy v Zakavkaz'ye." *Kavkazskoye sel'skoye khozyaystvo* 206 (1897), 1.

⁸² Kalantar, A. "Merinosy v Zakavkazye", 1

perspective based on interaction and collaboration of the sectarians with the world around them instead of reducing the community to confrontational doctrine, which in some circumstances could have made more sense from the position of power and repression that the imperial structure supposedly upheld. These sources were primarily from worldly people, however, none of the authors have directly quoted live conversations with the Molokans as much as Alexey Shashin did. Therefore, in what follows, the chapter will turn to his account.

Aleksei Shashin and the Orthodox-Molokan Debates:

Shashin's work is fundamental to understanding Molokan theology because it provided a first-hand account of a very profound religious and theological debate between an orthodox priest and a Molokan elder. In the book, the missionary attended a Molokan conciliary meeting and engaged in two debates with the Molokans, the debate was reproduced in Shashin's account verbatim in the form of a dialogue, although one needs to caution against the full and fair representation of the discussion given that Shashin might have edited the conversation, of course. One of the first things that had been discussed during the first debate was the origin of the Messiah Jesus Christ. In this debate, the Molokan elder is quoted to be saying that God the Father birthed Jesus Christ and not Mary.⁸³ To quote directly what the Molokan elder Istomin, who was debating with Shashin on behalf of the Molokan community in the Caucasus said: "We believe in two births of Jesus Christ: first from God the Father before any other beast and the second after the creation of the world."⁸⁴ What Istomin said here specifically does not really contradict the views of the Orthodox believers, who believe that the first birth was the inner-trinitarian generation of the son and the second was the incarnation.

⁸³ Shashin, *Missionerskaya Poyezdka Na Kavkaz*, 7.

⁸⁴ "My ispoveduem v Iisuse Khriste dva rozhdeniya : pervoe ot Boga Ottsa prezhe vsya koy tvari; vtoroe- posle sotvoreniya mira", Shashin, *Missionerskaya Poyezdka Na Kavkaz*, 7.

Asking a provocative question about who birthed Jesus the second time, the missionary receives another affirmation that Jesus was birthed from God the Father. Istomin responds to that by justifying his position and quoting the biblical source of Luke as proof of Jesus' origin.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, the Molokan elder does not elaborate further on this issue and hesitates to continue a discussion on Mary any further, which gives the missionary space to remark on how the sectarian community does not engage in proper Mariological veneration. Overall, Istomin seems to appear less theologically educated than Juravtsov from the previous chapter, as he could not answer if the Molokans considered God the Son in the equal "godly" terms as God the Father when asked. He said that it was irrelevant to their community as they were "simple and unschooled" people.⁸⁶ As mentioned previously, this is where the statements from the previous chapter source differ significantly. Without proper elaboration from the sources or secondary literature, this discrepancy creates a knowledge gap that can be covered with the analysis from this thesis. The first reason of such discrepancy can come from the epistemic partiality of the priest who could have deliberately skewed the words of the elder to make his position more defensible in the book. None of the written sources that are available for historical scholarly scrutiny are completely free of human manipulation, thus it can be assumed that the priest was politically agitated and personally inclined to configure the Molokan community as an outgroup (in Simmel's definition) and make them look less presentable and less defensible through the lens of the Holy Scripture.

The comparison of Istomin's "theological proficiency" to one of Juravtsov is unfair and asymmetric, though. Juravtsov lived in the times of Alexander I, whose rule was marked as relatively milder policies towards the Molokans as shown in the previous chapter, while Istomin

⁸⁵ "A ot kogo zhe bylo vtoroe rozhdenie Iisusa Khrista?" "Ot Boga zhe Ottsa", Ibid.; "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God", 1:35.

⁸⁶ Shashin, *Missionerskaya Poyezdka Na Kavkaz*, 8.

survived both Nicholas I and Alexander III, both of which were historically described as far stricter. Juravtsov was an honorary guest who helped compile a state-sponsored book while Istomin was a descendant of an exile community fallen out of the royal grace, however, a critical reading of Shashin's work with the epistemic partiality in mind nevertheless needs to take place.

Yet another unpleasant moment occurred when Shashin insisted that the Molokans answer whether Jesus was equal or junior to God, to which the Molokans eventually quoted "...I go unto the Father: for my Father is greater than I," from John.⁸⁷ Shashin parried this by mentioning how the Molokans previously admitted that Christ had two essences and John was sometimes about the godly essence and sometimes about the human essence. According to Shashin, this part was about Christ's human essence, which was indeed inferior to God.

Just like the sectarians used the past of early Christianity to justify their activity in the Russian empire, the orthodox missionaries like Shashin, who after listening to the reading of the holy Gospel of Luke during the sectarian meeting spoke to the gathered flock, used the examples from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 13:13-42) to justify their efforts among the sectarians.⁸⁸ To be precise, the missionary refers to the apostle Paul in Antioch preaching inside the synagogues to the believers of a different faith deliberately in order to stir their thoughts and souls in the right direction. The orthodox missionary was allowed to speak only after the conclusion of the sectarian ritual listening. Shashin quotes a Molokan named Andrey Konstantinov explaining that according to the Molokans, the divine order on the fates of the souls after the judgment day is written already but not yet signed, which allows room for redemption to those who repent, however, this room was temporarily limited and had a due date after which it would have been too late. After that,

⁸⁷ 14:28

⁸⁸ Shashin, *Missionerskaya Poyezdka Na Kavkaz*, 3.

Konstantinov is reported to have read the prayer to God without verbatim affiliation to either the Russian or Church Slavonic versions. Shashin was not impressed by the prayers and called them obnoxious, disjointed, soulless, and gloomy (“unylye”).⁸⁹ According to the text, they were only gloomy in quality but not in form, as the form was changed from a traditional prayer motive into a joyful and folk song-like. Before giving the word to the orthodox missionary, the sectarians read the epistle of Saint Paul the apostle to the Philippians. Instead of trying to enforce his own narrative, Shashin started his own speech with the epistle to the Philippians as well, which indicates a subtle submission to the initiative of the Molokans instead of confronting it. This is an important detail that shows that the representatives of the state and church in Russia were willing to compromise and play by the rules of sectarians in the cases where it was applicable and appropriate. This evidence can play a leading role in contributing to debunking, or rather adding nuance to the classical colonial narrative about the dichotomy of the oppressed and the oppressing in scholarly literature about the Molokans. This observation is twice as important because it shows both the sectarian theology in terms of their appeal to the apostles, and it shows the model of dynamic between the imperial central entity and the sectarian out group on the periphery. In this appeal, the orthodox missionary emphasized the true love between all humans and their unification (“soedinenie”)⁹⁰ in true faith and unilateral thought (“edinomyslie”). Beyond that, the orthodox side of the debate would use the holy scripture to affirm that the holy revelation is just as important as the scripture and therefore the only salvation can be found in the bosom of the Orthodox Church.⁹¹ If the Molokans relied only on the holy scripture, the orthodox missionary called them to rely just as strongly on *sacra traditio* or *sviashennoye predaniye*. Explaining in simpler terms,

⁸⁹ Shashin, *Missionerskaya Poyezdka Na Kavkaz*, 3.

⁹⁰ Shashin, *Missionerskaya Poyezdka na Kavkaz*, 4.

⁹¹ The term “holy revelation” makes little sense to the Western reader due to this precept being known as “the holy tradition” among the Western ecclesiastical works.

if the Holy Scripture is the books of the Old and New Testament, the *sacra tradition* is the aggregate unit of oral and written sources through which the Christian faith was transmitted throughout the generations and subsequently cemented in the works of the Church Fathers, decrees of Ecumenical and Universal Councils and liturgical texts. The way that this speech is constructed leads us to believe that even while proselytizing, the orthodox missionaries had to play by the rules of the sectarian community and respect their traditions in their house if they wanted to have any degree of success, even if conditional.

He eventually left Vladikavkaz for the Borokhovo station, where he met with Tambovskiy and Bezrukov village sectarians. There, he referred to the Tambov governorate-originating Molokans as (*molokane-velikorusy*).⁹² Surprisingly, it was a piece of evidence made against the scholarship that argued that the sectarians were not viewed as Russian by the imperial center. It is also a piece of evidence in favor of Breyfogle's settlement and colonization argument. Being perceived as Great Russian made the Molokans arguably less of a victim and more of a colonization agent, at least in this particular context. Moreover, returning to Breyfogle's other literature would show a much more nuanced understanding of the imperial perception of the Molokans. For example, the Molokans were simultaneously "Russian" and "more sectarian than Russian", which destabilized and problematized their ties to their ethnic brethren and historical homeland.⁹³

The missionary book of Shashin and the debates with the Molokans have been summarized and analyzed. This concluding paragraph of the section will contextualize the Molokan sect and contrast it with the other, more "extreme" sects to assess how their respective ideologies helped them adapt and overcome or accelerate their decline. It starts with a conversation on the other sects

⁹² Shashin, *Missionerskaya Poyezdka na Kavkaz*, 13-14.

⁹³ Breyfogle, "The Possibilities of Empire," 2-18.

based on the secondary literature about them and shifts to the personal analysis of the author based on previous contents of the thesis. It focuses on the discussion about how some sects practiced stricter or more lenient rules than the others and thus provided less or more risk to the imperial order.⁹⁴ Some of counterpart sects of the Molokans were the Doukhobors, the Khlysts and the Skoptsy. For example, Rieber writes of the listed sectarians as those who rejected the imperial authority even further and practiced acts of self-flagellation, extreme asceticism and bodily mutilation.⁹⁵ Such practice was seen as outright blasphemous and dangerous for the social order. Very roughly speaking, the Khlysty or Skoptsy could engage in hazardous activities that would strain the Russian system of healthcare if they gained prominence, while the Molokans, due to both the belief above in corporal resurrection and the flexibility that their prayer book provided with space for allegory, refrained from such “drastic practices.

Conclusion.

The research on the primary sources which consisted of the Molokan letter to the Russian emperor and sources produced by imperial observers such as the work of A. Shashin, two major aspects were revealed. Firstly, it was revealed that the imperial periphery and imperial center do not speak the same language in terms of understanding theology and cosmology, as it was evident from the discrepancy between the sources about how to understand the birth of Christ and the Theotokos. Secondly, it was revealed that the Molokan community was not as isolated as it was described in the scholarship, and displayed considerable agency in not only preserving their own communities but also expanding religion even in exile by collecting donations and then emergency funds for

⁹⁴ Aleksey Rukhlin, “Sekty i Religioznye Dvizheniya V Rossiyskoy Imperii Vo Vtoroy Polovine XIX- Pervoy Chetverti XX V. Na Stranitsakh Simbirskikh i Samarskikh Eparkhial’nykh Vedomostey,” *Gumanitarniy: Aktual’nye Problemy Gumanitarnoy Nauki i Obrazovaniya* 21, no. 1 (53) (2021): 48–62.

⁹⁵ Rieber, Alfred J. “Merchants and entrepreneurs in imperial Russia,” (*No Title*) (1982):209.

Orthodox peasants. Furthermore, the missionaries have self-admitted to using the narrative created by the sectarians instead of trying to insist on their own.

The topic of sectarian theology in a comparative framework is important because it allows to register greater agency of marginalized and forgotten communities. Scholars often talk about the consequences that the sectarian community had on the region, but it is occasionally in such a language that indeed partially takes away the agency of these communities and their own ability to act as individual subjects which contributed to their own development and survival and even managed to proselytize other people in very hostile environment where they were alienated from their home and scattered across the Caucasus which is logistically difficult to navigate due to its highland geography. Nevertheless, some institutional characteristics of the sectarian communities allowed them to survive the adversities better, the best example of it can be seen in their practice of confessions by letter-writing.

The topic of the periphery and the center in the religious context, as extensively discussed in the introduction, is present not only in the Russian context. Religion can often shift and mutate on the distant horizons, as lower population density and higher presence of natural landscapes and entities (such as less manned lands being potentially more diverse with flora and fauna than high-infrastructure urban centers full of industrial complexes) give way for isolation and superstition. One could argue that the condition of the periphery, combined with a more difficult access to formal education and medicine might also give way to a development of religious communities that is different to that of groups of faith in the imperial center or urban environments, and it would be worthwhile to pursue this as a research question further in comparative perspective, for example in studying the Ottoman or other contiguous empires.

Another good way to analyze the sources would be to use the theory established by Georg Simmel that explains why a social conflict can often come from disagreements on religion and culture. The book written by A. Shashin plays a distinctively major role in the second research chapter dedicated to the imperial perspectives on the Molokan faith as it presents a clear contrast between what was considered the orthodox and heterodox views on Christianity and illustrates the Simmelian ingroup and outgroup hostility in the sphere of a theological debate. Simmel used the example of the conqueror and the conquered people to illustrate an example of how in-groups and out-groups form. For example, if a large empire with a large population conquered a small tribe, the tribe would become an out-group and the imperial population would be an in-group. Likewise, the imperials from the perspective of the tribals could easily be seen as out-groupers themselves, which could cause a rift if some of the tribals chose to mimic the fashion of the imperials for any given reason or migrate to larger cities. This could help contextualize and analyze the reasons of the treatment that the Molokans received as they received the status of an out-group. Simmelian and comparatives approaches can yield results for the debates on the imperial center and periphery, as well as the state-church-society relationships.

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