

OLD BELIEVERS' FUNERAL CEREMONIES IN SOVIET LATVIA: THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR PRACTICES

Oksana Kovzele, Ilze Kacane, Maija Grizane
Daugavpils University, Latvia



Introduction

The modern world is currently undergoing one of the largest waves of various catastrophes (global pandemics, natural disasters, acts of terrorism etc.) leading to the re-assessment of individual and collective attitudes towards and perceptions of death and funeral as a rite of transition.

For specialists in folklore, ethnography and history, funeral rituals of Old Believers are a valuable research material. Scientific literature provides several pieces of ethnographic research on the peculiarities of Old Believers' funeral traditions, also in regional discourse (Rogers 2009; Fursova 2014; Krjukova 2015; Pilina 2019, etc.). At the same time, the influence of political, economic and social factors upon the structure and process of funeral rituals has not been extensively studied yet.

The aim of the research is to investigate the specificity of and transformations in Latgalian Old Believers' (mostly are representatives of Bespopovcy ['having no priests'] branch) funeral rituals and ceremony, caused by the impact of political ideology in Soviet Latvia (1940–1941; 1944/45–1991).

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Methodology

Methods of cultural-historical, ethnographical and qualitative data processing have been employed in the research.

The empiric base of the research is provided by the oral history sources from the collection of the Oral History Centre at the Faculty of Humanities of Daugavpils University (DU MV), which includes life stories of Latgale region population recorded within the period of 2003–2021, and the collection of the Centre of Cultural Research at the Institute of the Humanities and Social Sciences (DU KPC) which was started in 1977. Both collections contain more than 200 Old Believers' life stories coming from Latgale (the south-eastern region of Latvia).

Results

Under the conditions of the Soviet occupation regime, Latvia's society was introduced to until-then-unknown atheistic world view which was one of the cornerstones of communist ideology. The data analysis obtained in interviews shows that the policy implemented by the Soviet power changed Latgalian Old Believers' religious practices and rituals: they started practicing one of the three types of funeral ceremonies – religious (unofficial), secular (official), and hybrid.

1. Religious funeral with observing ancient traditions and canons

During the Soviet period, preparing the deceased persons for the funeral and their burial in accordance with canonical traditions accepted in their denomination were the most frequent practices among Old Believers. They strictly followed the order established by their ancestors, according to which three days and three nights the Book of Psalms had to be read: "[...] people were buried with God, singing was done and reading was done [...]" (DU MV 1039).

The ritual of preparing for the funeral involved the participation of family members and relatives of the deceased as well as specially invited, experienced *pevchie* [singers]: "And a father was buried there [...] what was required from me, I was reading there for three days, so we buried... and singers, you understand, and all this according to all canons" (DU MV 831-1).

Above-mentioned and other traditions and rituals were followed secretly at home and in the prayer houses (*molennye*) which were still functioning: "[...] my father was sitting and watching what kind of cars arrived, [...] I had worked in many schools, and one director came, and teachers came when my son died [...]. Only after they left, then they [readers] started [reading psalms]" (DU KPC¹).

Results

2. Secular funeral ceremony

The tradition of secular funeral began to spread among Old Believers during Nikita Khrushchev's time (1953–1964) when mechanisms of surveillance and control over celebration and ritual activities in Latvia became much stricter. Many people in Latgale region, due to the fear of possible repressions or due to the desire to build up their carrier, supported policy of atheism and in isolated cases even initiated controlling religious practices themselves.

Secular funerals were less popular than religious funeral ceremonies. They involved the presence of the ceremony conductor, attendance of the oratory as well as musical accompaniment: "Well, we had a brass band at our factory. For accompaniment, for performing at burial rituals. [...]" (DU MV 782); "[This] funeral was with music only, but the majority [of funerals are] with the spiritual father" (DU MV 712).

3. Hybrid funeral with combined religious and secular elements

This kind of funeral was arranged, if before the death a person had asked it: "A funeral with music and a *pop* [clergyman] – and he fulfilled his mother's last wish" (DU KPC²). If the administrative position held by some family member required organization of an official funeral ceremony, first a private religious ceremony was organized at home, and only after that – an official, secular ceremony according to the Soviet pattern (DU MV 1076a).

The form of a hybrid funeral (religious ceremony "separate from the body" at home and the secular ceremony in the military graveyard) applies also to the burial of the perished military persons from religious families, among them those killed in Afghanistan war.

Conclusion

Forced secularization in Soviet Latvia constituted a great challenge to Latgalian Old Believers' cultural and religious identity and initiated transformations of their religious practices leading to the emergence of the divided community and more secular society.