

**Prayer and the Politics of Place:
Molokan Church-Building, Tsarist Law, and the Quest for a Public Sphere in Late
Imperial Russia**

Nicholas B. Breyfogle
Department of History, The Ohio State University

Paper Presented at the Conference
“Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russian Culture”
University of Illinois, February 23, 2002

***** Work-in-Progress *****

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On January 30, 1892, the police agent in charge of Baku's second district, Elishkevich, entered a building belonging to the Molokan I. F. Kolesnikov with orders forcibly to seal the house and evict those on the premises. The authorities believed that Kolesnikov had built and was subsequently operating a Molokan prayer house without the necessary authorization from the Ministry of the Interior and they wanted immediately to put a stop to this "crime." It was neither the first nor last time in the late Imperial period that tsarist authorities compulsorily shut down—or even razed—churches, temples, or other spiritual buildings erected by any one of Russia's numerous sectarian denominations [*sektanty*]. In this case, however, the police intervention was only a small episode in a much longer confrontation between Kolesnikov and the tsarist state over civil and religious rights for Molokans. The affair ultimately involved two trials. The first stemmed from a lawsuit that Kolesnikov filed against the Baku provincial governor, Rogge, claiming that the seizure of his property had been arbitrary and unlawful, violating his rights as a Russian subject on numerous levels. The suit, which was finally heard by the Senate's Cassation Department in late 1894, proved ultimately unsuccessful. The second, widely publicized case, was a criminal trial held in the chambers of the Baku Justice of the Peace. There, on the basis of evidence brought to bear by the local police, clergy, and other officials, Kolesnikov was found guilty of illegally constructing a prayer house for the Molokan community and punished.

While Kolesnikov's story appears on many levels to be a civil-rights defeat for the Molokan community, it was nonetheless a watershed moment, both symbolically and in the lived experience of these religious sectarians. Molokans lauded Kolesnikov for his heroism in pushing forward their religious needs and championing their demands for civil rights despite state opposition. Moreover, Kolesnikov's case is worthy of detailed exploration because it represented the first significant indication—and simultaneously also a catalyst—of a series of fundamental changes in daily Molokan life that would appear with ever accelerating speed from the 1880s through to the end of the tsarist order. These changes involved a metamorphosis both in their religiosity as well as in Molokan aspirations to take part in tsarist Russia's evolving public sphere. On one level, the very building of a prayer house, whether permitted or not, represented a significant transformation in the religious practice of these non-conformist Christians. For most of

their existence, they theologically eschewed specially designated sacred spaces of any sort, believing instead that true Christians could meet to worship God anywhere. During the nineteenth century, Molokans had few if any church buildings and most often met in rooms of private houses to pray.¹ On another level, the Kolesnikov prayer house is indicative of a broader process of religious and social institutionalization within the Molokan community. In turn, this institutionalization illuminates both the Molokans' increasing presence in Baku's public sphere and also their growing restiveness and aggressiveness in wanting to expand their public roles and their civil rights and opportunities. Recent scholarship has expanded our understanding of questions of "civil society" and "public sphere" in Russia. As the Kolesnikov case makes clear, Molokans—like other religious minorities—comprised a significant, as yet understudied, component of that civil sphere.² Throughout, the Kolesnikov incident sheds light on the nature of tsarist religious policy and the parameters of religious toleration in the transitional period between 1864 and 1905 during which tsarist officials extended partial toleration to religious non-conformists such as sectarians and Old Believers.

Facts in Evidence, Stories Told

Before exploring the broader religious and social implications of Kolesnikov's prayer house, I will lay out the storyline of this drama. The chronicle unfolds in a series of stages, each filled with tales and exaggerations as Kolesnikov, other Molokans, and various tsarist officials strove to prove their points and win their cases. The narrative begins with Kolesnikov's initial requests for permission to build on his property; his construction of a building and the beginning of services; and police intervention to shut down the building. It culminates with Kolesnikov's lawsuit against Rogge and his trial

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the term "church" in its most broad, general sense to mean "a building for public and especially Christian worship" (Webster's).

² For some interesting unpublished work, see the conference papers by Jane Burbank, Cathy Frierson and David Macey from the panel "Civil Society in the Village: Peasant Aspirations and the Common Good in Late Imperial Russia," AAASS, November 2001; and Brad Bradley, "Societies, Civil Society and Autocracy in Tsarist Russia," paper presented at the Midwest Russian History Workshop, Chicago, October, 2000. See also Clowes, Kassow, and West, *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia*.

before the Baku Justice of the Peace for having built a Molokan church without state permission. In the process, these historical incidents illuminate the ever-shifting boundaries of tsarist religious policy in late Imperial Russia. With each post-emancipation legislative act (such as in 1864, 1874, and 1883), the government endeavored to extend certain privileges and civil liberties to religious minorities, while simultaneously striving to maintain the preeminence of the Orthodox Church and to prevent the spread of any of these other Christian communities. As the Kolesnikov trial underscores, it was a delicate balancing act that required tsarist officials to police ever-blurring boundaries between what was acceptable and unacceptable. The limitations of religious toleration were open to very diverse interpretations by different administrative units, and tsarist officials did what they could to interpret the laws in ways that they found most beneficial. Simultaneously, these laws energized many religious communities to take advantage of the new rights they found for themselves while pushing even further for greater freedoms.³

The primary issue throughout the Kolesnikov case was the question of whether he had built a prayer house [*molitvennyi dom*] for the Molokan community without the permission of state authorities. In many respects, this seems a small detail and not one deserving of the fuss that ensued. However, the issue of prayer houses was a pivotal component of the most recent comprehensive law on “*raskol’niki*,”⁴ the decree of May 3, 1883. This law, which revised the statutes of 1864, was the culmination of more than twenty years of discussions in St. Petersburg within various commissions concerning the place of Old Believers and sectarians in Russian polity and society. The statute of 1883 granted *raskol’niki* seemingly blanket rights to “carry out communal prayer, fulfill spiritual rites and conduct worship to God according to their rites both in private homes

³ SPChR (1875), 609-617, 672-682; PSZ (3) May 3, 1883, no. 1545, 219-221; V. I. Iasevich-Borodaevskaia, *Bor’ba za veru. Istoricheskobytovye ocherki i obzor zakonodatel’sva po staroobriadchestvu i sektantstvu v ego posledovatel’nom razvitii* (St. Petersburg: Gosudarstvennaia Tipografiia, 1912), 1-108; N. L. Solov’ev, *Polnyi krug dukhovnykh zakonov* (Moscow: 1907), 18-44; and Peter Waldron, “Religious Toleration in Late Imperial Russia,” in *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*, edited by Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 103-120.

⁴ For most of the nineteenth century, tsarist legislation referred solely to “*raskol’niki*,” a term that could designate both sectarians and Old Believers or just simply the latter. However, even when the intent of the law was directed solely against Old Believers, it was almost always immediately applied to sectarian communities as well.

and equally in buildings specially designated for that function.”⁵ For the sectarians at least, the new laws dramatically expanded their rights to practice their faith unmolested and allowed them to have their own buildings specially designated for religious functions.⁶ Previously, they had only had been permitted to conduct services in the privacy of their own homes, without any kind of public manifestation. However, other articles of the decree placed a series of conditions and restrictions on these rights in an effort to ensure that the sectarians did not bathe in too much freedom. Both sectarians and Old Believers were required to receive permission from their local governor or the Ministry of the Interior (in consultation with the Synod and its agents) if they wished to repair or build religious structures—and this permission proved elusive. Significantly for the Kolesnikov case, the statute continued to make no prohibitions against prayer meetings occurring in private homes.

In the context of this legal climate, in late 1884 or early 1885, Kolesnikov submitted two requests for building permission, one to the gubernatorial administration requesting authorization to build a Molokan prayer house on a plot of land in Baku’s Kubin square that he owned, and another to the Baku town Duma for the right to construct a private residence on the same property. He submitted two sets of architectural plans, with a different layout for each building, and intended to build both the church and the residence next to each other. Despite his aspirations, however, Kolesnikov received permission only for the latter, residential structure. Here, as was frequently the case, Synod officials blocked authorization. The regional bureau of the Synod argued that since there were already four other prayer houses in Baku, “the construction of a new prayer house in the town of Baku, given the existing ones, could not be permitted as it posed a powerful danger to Orthodoxy.”⁷ Moreover, although the Duma granted him the right to build a residential dwelling, the city council required him to swear an oath that he would not build a prayer house on the site.⁸

⁵ PSZ (3) May 3, 1883, no. 1545, article 5, 219-220.

⁶ In contrast, for the Old Believers also subsumed under these laws, 1883 was in many respects a step backwards from the freedoms of 1864. Robson, *Old Believers*, 55.

⁷ RGIA f. 1354, op. 3, d. 1267, ll. 48-48ob, 52ob-53. The pattern of Synod officials barring wherever possible the construction or re-opening of prayer houses was also commonplace in relation to Old Believers. See Robson, *Old Believers*, 55.

⁸ In trial, Kolesnikov disputed the town council’s assertion that he had sworn any oath attesting that he would not build a prayer house on the land authorized for the residential building.

Kolesnikov was officially informed of the denial of permission to build the prayer house in 1887, by which time it was in many respects a moot point since he had already gone ahead in 1886 and erected a building on his property. He claimed in later testimony that this edifice was the private residence that the city council authorized. However, as is evident from the sketch in Figure 1, the house was designed with one extremely large central room linked to two smaller ones, a hallway, and entranceway.⁹ Later documents indicate that this building followed the architectural designs of the structure originally designated in his petitions as the prayer house. Nonetheless, for approximately one and a half years, Kolesnikov lived in this building before moving to other quarters erected on the lot.

In October 1889, Kolesnikov petitioned the Emperor for state authorization to turn his new building into prayer house. Reflecting a certain political savvy, Kolesnikov noted that many non-Christian communities in Russia had the right to a prayer house while the Molokans—loyal Russians—had been required to meet in private residences. At the same time, he sweetened the pot by saying that in “memory of the visitation to the city of Baku of your Imperial Highness,” he wanted to convert his “private residential house” into a “a prayer house in which the Molokan community, which in Baku comprises more than 1,000 souls, can freely conduct prayer services, carrying to God heartfelt prayers about the health of You and Your August Family.”¹⁰ He included a supporting letter signed by eighty Molokans in support of his petition. However, all of these promises and gilded language were of no avail and the MVD turned down the request.

It is worth taking a moment to reflect on the MVD’s reason for denying Kolesnikov’s 1889 petition. Most notably, the explanation that the Department of General Affairs (DOD) gave for its actions diverges from the laws as they existed on the books, and, whether consciously or unconsciously, the MVD sidestepped the legal code. The MVD-DOD decision stated that because the Molokans were recognized as “one of

⁹ RGIA 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, ll. 3-4, 16ob-17. Figure 1 is from l. 21.

¹⁰ RGIA f. 1284, op. 221-1889, d. 92, l. 2. The petition of a Molokan from the village of Nizhnie Akhty (Erevan province), Fedil Ivanovich Shubin, to the Emperor in 1900 requesting permission for a prayer house was very similar in tone. He too clearly tailored his message to the intended recipient in an effort to ingratiate himself and his goals. He “promised to pray to God and Jesus Christ for the future health and success of the Tsar and his family,” if the tsar would grant them the right to their communal prayer house. RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1899, d. 114, ll. 5-5ob.

the more pernicious” sects, they were not permitted to build communal chapels. Yet, the edict of 1883 had not only granted this right to the Molokans, but simultaneously had done away with the classification system that divided the sectarians (and *raskol’niki* in general) into more or less harmful categories, in theory equalizing treatment for all of them (with the frequent exception of the Skoptsy).¹¹

In many respects, the MVD’s misreading—or outright defiance—of the rules reflects the ambiguous and reluctant nature of tsarist steps towards increased religious rights. It also demonstrates the frequent disjuncture between tsarist laws and administrative practice in late Imperial Russia. Kolesnikov’s case was by no means unique. When Molokans from the village of Nizhnie Akhty in Erevan province petitioned on a number of occasions between 1897 and 1905 to receive permission to open an already constructed prayer house, they too were denied for similar reasons: that as “a most pernicious sect” they were not entitled to the benefits of the May 3, 1883 law. There was a great deal of confusion at different levels of officialdom as to how to act towards Molokans. While the MVD denied authorization to the Nizhnie Akhty villagers, the Erevan governor, Count Tizengauzen, argued that 1883 gave them full rights to build the church and he personally saw no reason not to permit it. The Chief Administrator of the Caucasus, G. S. Golytsin, was more confused. In general, he agreed with Tizengauzen’s interpretation, but then was unsure how to integrate the 1883 rules with MVD circulars of 1894 and 1895 dealing with the Shtundists.¹²

Additionally, the denial of the applicability of the 1883 laws to Molokans in regards to religious questions stands in stark contrast to other decisions on the part of the MVD concerning the Molokans’ economic prerogatives. When officials in the South Caucasus approached the MVD asking whether the 1883 statutes concerning entitlement to merchant status and rights, and to freer movement for trade purposes, applied to the Molokans, the MVD replied unequivocally that 1883 pertained to the Molokans and that they now were granted the same privileges (and restrictions) in these business regards as

¹¹ RGIA f. 1284, op. 221-1889, d. 92, ll. 8-8ob.

¹² RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1899, d. 114, ll. 1-1ob, 2-3, 14-15, 17 and *Vsepoddanneishii otchet ober-prokurora sviateishego sinoda po vedomstvu pravoslavnogo ispovedaniia za 1894 i 1895 gody* (St. Petersburg: Sinodal’naia tipografiia, 1898), 229-231.

the Orthodox population.¹³ Given the Molokans' significant economic role in the South Caucasus and elsewhere, it is perhaps unsurprising that the MVD would be willing to implement the 1883 regulations differently when it suited them.

Despite repeated prohibitions, in 1890, Kolesnikov allowed the building to be used regularly as a prayer house. He drew up a contract with eleven Molokan elders for a twelve-year period, beginning March 1890, which allowed them to utilize the building for Molokan services and other religious functions without payment.¹⁴ Beginning in October 1890, the renters held regular services and meetings in the building, a fact that became quickly known to the authorities. In response, the provincial administration ordered that Kolesnikov and the renters be brought to criminal accountability for carrying out sectarian worship in an illegally constructed prayer house. An inquest was opened in the autumn of 1891, but the administrative system was slow and it was not until December 1893 that the paperwork made its way through all of the appropriate bureaus and the Georgian-Imeretian Office of the Synod ordered these Molokan brought to trial. In the meantime, the local police had been given the task of instituting surveillance on Kolesnikov to prevent services taking place in the building. However, these measures did little to stop the Molokans worshipping there, a fact that impelled local Orthodox officials to send a warning to the governor that the Molokans were continuing to use the "chapel"—which officially should have been closed in 1887 when Kolesnikov was denied permission.¹⁵

As a result of the Molokans' refusal to stop their prayer services, Rogge ordered Kolesnikov's building forcibly shut down and sealed, which was done on January 30, 1892. The report describing the prayer house's closure indicates that the police found three tenants and their families there, two occupying the smaller rooms and the third living in the larger hall, where stacks of benches were lined up against the walls. Since the police were only concerned with the room in which Molokan services were being

¹³ See, for example, RGIA f. 1284, op. 221-1883, d. 43, ll. 1-4ob and RGIA f. 1284, op. 221-1883, d. 64, ll. 1-6ob.

¹⁴ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, l. 4; RGIA f. 1354, op. 3, d. 1267, ll. 48ob-49.

¹⁵ Above and RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, l. 17-17ob.

held, they only sealed the large hall, letting two of the three tenants remain in their apartments.¹⁶

Rogge took these police actions without waiting for the impending decision of the court trial. In doing so, the governor opened up the opportunity for Kolesnikov to argue that he had acted arbitrarily in shutting down the church. However, Rogge countered that he was only following the statutes, circulars, and orders sent to him by the MVD and the Chief Caucasian Administrator, all of which gave him the right—indeed, required him without choice—to act as he did. In particular, he pointed to a circular sent out by the Chief Administrator, S. A. Sheremetev, in 1892 that laid out general guidelines (from the specific case of a Subbotnik temple) for what governors were to do in cases of unauthorized church building on the part of sectarians. Sheremetev asserted that these cases were to be correctly investigated by police and then sent to the court institutions for the appropriate trials. However, he also underscored that the provincial administration was not deprived of the right to close such prayer houses on their own authority.¹⁷

Soon after the sealing of his building, Kolesnikov filed a lawsuit against Rogge with the Senate. He took two tacks in his suit. On one hand, he argued that he had broken no laws and that the laws of 1883 granted Molokans the right to carry out their faith as they wished. On the other hand, he argued that Rogge's order was illegitimate and a direct challenge to Kolesnikov's economic rights, saying that he was losing rental money from the building with each passing month. He requested that Rogge remunerate him for his business losses. Two and a half years later, on December 8 1894, the Cassation Department met to discuss Kolesnikov's suit and decided against him.¹⁸

While the Cassation Department was sitting on Kolesnikov's lawsuit, the Baku Justice of the Peace found the Molokan guilty in January of 1894 of building a Molokan prayer house without state authorization.¹⁹ Throughout the trial, one detail was

¹⁶ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, ll. 13-14, 18-18ob

¹⁷ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, ll. 18ob-19ob, 22-22ob. Rogge also asserted that, according to general laws, "governors and all official people are required, with all means in their possession, to prevent and to suppress any criminal actions," and Rogge believed that this is exactly what he was doing in the Molokan case.

¹⁸ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, l. 24.

¹⁹ On this case, see RGIA f. 1354, op. 3, d. 1267, ll. 49ob-57ob and the three articles entitled "Sudebnaia khronika," *Kaspii*, no. 10 (January 14, 1894): 2, no. 12 (January 16, 1894): 3, and no. 13 (January 18, 1894):3.

considered the most important for both prosecution and defense: whether the building in question was a private residence or a prayer house. The distinction was crucial to the case because the 1883 laws permitted Molokans, or other *raskol'niki*, to conduct services of worship according to their faith in their private homes. If the building was considered a residence, then Kolesnikov had committed no crime. If the building was legally defined as a prayer house, then Kolesnikov was guilty.

Both state and sectarian were required to go through an elaborate dance of defining the building. This definitional process is indicative of the complexities and difficulties—and the at times incongruous results—generated in the gray zones of the partial toleration that characterized the laws of 1864 and 1883. It seems clear that Kolesnikov knew he was building a prayer house and yet had to prove it was not. In contrast, the prosecutors had to demonstrate, without much evidence on their side, that it was a church, could only be a church, and had all the markings of a Molokan church. For his part, Kolesnikov argued that the building was simply a private residence, approved by the Baku council, in which Molokans happened to meet for religious services. According to reports from the trial Kolesnikov argued that the large hall did not make his building a church:

He built the large hall in that building for weddings or for the meeting at his house of a large number of guests. By the request of [other Molokans] he permitted them gratis from time to time during large holidays to carry out in his building prayer services according to the Molokan rite, which prayer services they conducted there because they did not have a big building.²⁰

He bolstered his case by noting that two separate police inspections of the house found “all the things necessary for permanent habitation” in the building.²¹ Kolesnikov’s lawyer at the trial added other arguments to support his contention that “it is not shown in this trial that the building was built as a prayer house for Molokan worship.”

Judging from the furniture that is described in the [police report] ... one can come to the conclusion that the building was intended for habitation. The external signs of the building also cannot serve as

²⁰ RGIA f. 1354, op. 3, d. 1267, l. 52ob.

²¹ “Sudebnaia khronika,” *Kaspii* no. 12 (January 16, 1894): 3.

criteria from which to judge about whether the building was specifically designed for a chapel.²²

In contrast, the prosecution worked to prove the opposite—“that the room was specially and only designated” for Molokan prayer services.²³ The police officer testified that the building that was actually built matched the architectural plans that Kolesnikov originally submitted for the prayer house and not those of the residence. The prosecution also brought in an Orthodox priest, Potashev, as an expert witness to substantiate official reports. Given the stipulations of the law codes, he found himself required to assert that the building resembled a Molokan church despite the absence of any tradition of church architecture among the Molokans.

Judging from external appearance and internal decoration of the building ... [including] the benches, tables, cupboards, lamps; and the form of the building—an oblong quadrangle—he comes to the full conviction that this building is intended to serve not as living quarters, but rather for Molokan prayer. This fact is also indicated by the absence of a throne and images. A similar type of structure is recognized by the Molokans; a chapel according to their religious views, should have the form of a regular room. The hall of the building is in all ways not conducive for habitation. That this is a chapel is clear from that fact that this building is entirely fenced off from the remaining outbuildings.²⁴

His argument approached the outlandish when, according to newspaper accounts of the trial, Potashev argued that “the attributes of a residential place of habitation in this case play the role of a lightning rod” that the structure was in fact a church. The more it looked like a residence, he asserted, the more it was likely a Molokan prayer house. Not unexpectedly, Kolesnikov’s lawyer challenged Potashev’s claims, noting: “if one followed the conclusions of the expert, then one can conclude that any large room can be designated a prayer house.”²⁵ That said, the lawyer was himself not innocent of improbable explanations. He tried to argue that the building could not be a Molokan

²² RGIA f. 1354, op. 3, d. 1267, l. 54ob.

²³ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, l. 18.

²⁴ RGIA f. 1354, op. 3, d. 1267, l. 53ob-54.

²⁵ Kaspîi (January 16, 1894): 3.

prayer house because of the absence of crosses affixed to the walls. Yet, Molokans doctrinally eschewed graven images of any sort in their worship, including crosses.²⁶

In the end, the Justice of the Peace found the evidence and argumentation of the prosecution convincing and convicted Kolesnikov. For this crime, he was sentenced to two months in prison and required either to raze the structure or renovate it into a residential dwelling. The trial was not, however, an entire loss for the Molokan community. The renters of the building were simultaneously brought up on charges before the Justice of the Peace. In their case, however, the Justice found them innocent since there was no indication either that they had helped to build the prayer house or that they were aware of the official prohibition given to Kolesnikov. Here, the Justice upheld their rights—as outlined in the statutes of May 3, 1883—freely to carry out their religious rites in private homes. There could be no crime if they prayed and worshipped in Kolesnikov’s building as long as they had considered it a private residence.²⁷

Changing Architectures of Prayer and Community

Kolesnikov’s efforts to build a prayer house for Molokans in Baku is both symbolic of, as well as a significant stage in, a larger change in religious practice that was taking place among Molokans in various parts of the Russian empire during the last decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Molokan religiosity shifted away from a refutation of the need for specially designated spaces in which to worship to an acceptance of mono-functional religious spaces that increasingly took on distinct spatial and architectural characteristics. In this process, Kolesnikov’s case provides a small window onto the mechanisms of religious change among Molokans. Notably, doctrinal or theological considerations seem not to have played the major role in bringing on this shift (or at least do not appear in the documentary record). Instead, personal conflicts and practical considerations (such as space issues and changing tsarist laws) were decisive. Notably, Molokan church-building movements appear to have been part of a larger

²⁶ Kaspîi (January 16, 1894): 3.

²⁷ RGIA, f. 1354, op. 3, d. 1267, ll. 56-56ob.

zeitgeist in Christian religious life in Russia, involving, each in their own way and for their own reasons, Orthodox peasants, Old Believers, and Subbotniks.²⁸

The change in practice towards more established churches was by no means an abrupt transformation. Molokans had met for decades to worship in the apartments and houses of certain of their members. While not in specially designated buildings, the rooms that were used for this sort of prayer meeting generally became institutionalized as the place of worship, at times taking on enhanced meaning for the Molokans. At the same time, when new residential houses were built, they often included design elements—such as an oversized room—that distinguished them as special prayer buildings. Thus, while in the early years, Molokans would crowd into whatever space they could find in a member’s house, later they began to build houses which included larger rooms that the owner consciously knew would be used for prayer meetings and other communal functions. In this way, Kolesnikov’s multi-use building, with its space for residents and for prayer meetings was a further step in a longer tradition or evolution. At the same time, the very blurring between a residential house and a church in the Kolesnikov case—so plaguing to tsarist and Orthodox authorities—took on a very different meaning for the Molokans themselves for whom mono-functional sacred space was not necessarily a particularly familiar concept.²⁹

Molokans and Churches: Theology and Law

Kolesnikov’s aim to build a separate prayer house went against standard Molokan beliefs and practices regarding the need for special buildings in which to meet to pray, and reflects a larger shift in Molokan religiosity at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, for most of their existence, Molokans met to pray in the private, residential houses or apartments of particular members of their congregations—or outdoors in the woods or fields—and saw no need to build separate buildings designated as sacred

²⁸ On the Orthodox, see Vera Shevzov, “Chapels and the Ecclesial World of Prerevolutionary Russian Peasants,” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 3 (fall 1996): 585-613. On the Subbotniki, see A. I. Masalkin, “K istorii zakavkazskikh sektantov: II Subbotniki.” *Kavkaz* no. 307 (November 19, 1893): 2 and RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, ll. 22-22ob. On Old Believers, see Robson, *Old Believers*, 53-74.

²⁹ GMIR f. 2, op. 8, d. 237, 1910, ll. 66-71, 82-84. OTHER FILES ***.

spaces. As part of their early tenets, Molokans opposed any external signs of Christianity, including temples or churches.³⁰ As one Molokan wrote:

In the gospels it is said that God is spirit: those worshipping Him should worship him in spirit and truth (John 4: 24); for this reason all religious services should not be external or ritual, but spiritual. All rites of visible churches, that is: signs of the cross, bows, prayers and also temples, all of this is not established by the holy scriptures, but thought up by humans in their own arbitrariness.³¹

As such, Molokans attached little importance to special buildings believing instead that the true “church” of Christ was not in a place but in the meeting of true believers, wherever they may be. A Molokan author, N. F. Kudinov, noted: “About Churches and splendid temples, they said it is not the place that paints the people but the people the place. The Church of Christ or the temple of God are the gathering together of the faithful in God, in accordance with the teachings of the apostles.” He pointed to a series of places in the New Testament to provide scriptural support, such as 1 Corinthians 3:16, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” and 1 Peter 2:5, “and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house...”³² Similarly, Haxthausen noted these characteristics of the Molokans on his travels through Russia in the first half of nineteenth century:

In conclusion, they discuss their concept of the church which they recognize solely as an assembly of true believers according the words of Christ: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am present among them.” They do not approve of material churches, buildings made of stone or wood. “Solomon built a House of God, but the Almighty does not live in temples made by human hands, etc.”³³

While Molokans eschewed formal churches for doctrinal and scriptural reasons, the laws and demands of the tsarist state, which closely guarded the prerogatives of the Orthodox Church, also imposed on them a prohibition against church building from

³⁰ In addition to the examples discussion below, on traditional Molokan opposition to temples of any sort, see RGIA f. 1661, op. 1, d. 445, l. 149ob and Ivan Ivanovich Sergeev, “Dukhovnye khristiane v Rossii (Istoricheskii ocherk),” *Dukhovnyi Khristianin* 7, no. 8 (August, 1912): 91-92.

³¹ Stollov, 301.

³² He also pointed to Ephesians 2:21-22, 1 Corinthians 3:11, 6:19, and 12:12, among other passages, as support for the Molokans’ views in this regard. Kudinov, *Stoletie*, 36-38. Translations for the Biblical references here are from the Revised Standard Version.

³³ Haxthausen (Starr version), 154. Kudinov uses the same quotation about God being among a small gathering of believers, Kudinov, *Stoletie*, 37-38.

without. To a certain degree, then, Molokans made a virtue out of necessity since, even if Molokan communities desired to build themselves separate prayer houses, they were legally barred from doing so. The state's concern with Molokan churches developed out of their trepidation over Old Believer churches, chapels, and monasteries. As was often the case in tsarist religious policy, the Molokan case was initially subsumed in this prohibition directed at Old Believers. Both secular and spiritual authorities were apprehensive that the existence of Old Believer religious buildings of any sort would attract Orthodox believers into the Old Believer fold. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Russian officials were in many respects obsessed with preventing Old Believer communities from building any kind of religious buildings. They were particularly concerned to ensure that Old Believer churches in no way resembled Orthodox ones in external appearance, to the point that they were not permitted to have bells that might attract Orthodox to their services.³⁴

By the late 1830s, however, tsarist laws and administrative practice increasingly came to target Molokan religious life specifically in an effort to stamp out the sect. In a decree of February 13, 1837, for example, it was ordered that every indication or demonstration of the Molokan sect "should not only be forbidden, but also where possible prevented through surveillance." In particular, these regulations banned Molokan prayer meetings of other services for worship, whether they took place in private homes or in *izby* specially constructed for the purposes of worship. Any Molokan church or assembly building that was discovered was to be torn down immediately, the parts sold off and the proceeds to go to charity, and the owners of the building punished.³⁵ These statutes directly impeded Molokan efforts to carry out their faith. For instance, tsarist forces stationed in Transcaucasian Molokan villages in the 1830s to 1850s feared that the Molokans might spread their message to the Orthodox soldiers. As a result, military officials in Molokan villages stringently forbade them from practicing their faith, even in the privacy of their own homes or in the forest far away from the

³⁴ There are large numbers of laws, edicts, and decrees coming from a variety of ministries, that dealt with the question of Old Believer churches and other religious buildings. For a small sampling, see the laws in SPChR (1875), dated June 10, 1734, July 21, 1768, April 6, 1778, July 21, 1788, March 12, 1798, Oct 27, 1800, Aug 19, 1826, and July 5, 1827. See also, Robson, *Old Believers*, 54-56.

³⁵ SPChR (1875), 189-191.

village. Soldiers searched out, captured, and then beat severely those Molokans found praying according to their own rites.³⁶

This is not to say that the laws entirely prevented the Molokans from meeting to pray, but it did tend to restrict meetings to private homes where they could more easily hide what they were doing from government surveillance. Especially in the South Caucasus, where the tsarist administration was relatively weak and where the sectarians played such important colonizing roles, the Molokans (and Dukhobors and Subbotniks) found themselves with much greater opportunity to carry out their faith than was often the case in the central provinces (as tsarist officials also fully realized).³⁷ From the 1850s onward, most tsarist officials in the Caucasus knew that Molokans had some form of prayer house, usually a designated space in a private home, and yet took few actions to stop these activities.³⁸

Moreover, whatever the foundations of their faith said about churches, there were Molokan communities that would have built themselves some form of designated prayer house had it not been for the obstacles put in their way by tsarist prohibitions. For example, Molokans from the village of Topchi in Shirvan province petitioned the Emperor in 1838 complaining that, based on the laws of February 13, 1837, the local administration was preventing them from opening a communal chapel in which to conduct their religious services.³⁹ Kolesnikov too pointed out, in his request for a prayer house, that tsarist law forbade Molokans from having prayer houses, and that these restrictions were part of the reason that the Molokans “gather[ed] together in private residential houses” in order to worship God and practice their faith.⁴⁰

Similarly, the Molokans of the Don branch [*Molokane Donskogo tolka*] in Tavriia province were not opposed to having designated prayer houses built for their community, yet found themselves unable to do so because of state restrictions. The religious

³⁶ GMIR f. 14, op. 3, d. 1962, 1902, ll. 1-5.

³⁷ RGIA f. 1284, op. 221-1886, d. 75, l. 3 [D-K report]; RGIA f. 1284, op. 197-1837, d. 143, ll. 1-1ob; see also the references in Breyfogle, “Heretics and Colonizers,” 98-99. Religious freedom was one of the principle reasons for voluntary resettlement to the South Caucasus.

³⁸ One can read in newspaper article after newspaper article stories about, or mentions of, Molokan prayer houses and prayer services. See, for example, *Kasprii*, 1, no. 95 (December 9, 1881): 2; *Kasprii* 3, no. 65 (June 10, 1883): 2; *Kasprii* 2, no. 79 (July 30 1882): 2. See also Kalashev, OTHER.

³⁹ RGIA f. 1284, op. 198-1838, d. 66, ll. 1-1ob.

⁴⁰ RGIA f. 1284, op. 221-1889, d. 92, l. 2.

teachings of the Don Molokans diverged in a number of respects from other strains of the Molokan faith, including a willingness to fulfill certain sacraments (although without priests), and a readiness to recognize state power.⁴¹ In an article of 1870, they expressed their beliefs in the necessity of specially designated prayer houses despite the original Molokan tenets.

From all of this it is clear that the community of believers comprises a living church. However, it is necessary to the community to have a place—a house for prayer and the carrying out of all church demands. Gathering together for this in a residential house or other building is not conducive. The community acted in this way out of extreme need; and for this reason if the benevolent government would be so kind as to permit the Molokans to build separate house for their prayer services, then the followers of the Don branch of the Molokans will forever thank the government with heartfelt feelings and pray to God about the government's good deeds.⁴²

Kolesnikov and Church-Building

Despite traditional Molokan beliefs, four factors appear to have been most important in setting Kolesnikov on his path to build a separate, designated building for conducting religious functions: the changing context of tsarist laws especially after 1883; personal factors and power struggles within the Molokan community; an increasing undesirability of meeting in private homes because of population size and the general physical conditions of such spaces; and a pan-Molokan shift in the importance they attached to designated worship space to the fulfillment of their Christianity. First, the request for Kolesnikov's prayer house was made possible by changes in tsarist religious policy. Only with the edict of May 3, 1883 did the Molokans officially gain the right to utilize prayer houses and this law opened up a greater space in which Molokans such as Kolesnikov (and other sectarian religious minorities) could act.

Second, perhaps not unexpectedly, personal factors and power struggles among the Baku Molokans played a significant role in Kolesnikov's story. By building the prayer house, he hoped to free himself and his followers from the turmoil and to gain

⁴¹ Stollov, "Neskol'sko slov o molokanakh," OZ, no. 6 (June 1870), 305, 310-311. On the Don branch of the Molokans, see also *Ispovedanie very Molokan donskogo tolka tavrisheskoi gubernii* (Simferopol': Tip. Spiro, 1875); A. I. Masalkin, "K istorii zakavkazskikh sektantov: I Molokane," *Kavkaz* no. 306 (November 18, 1893): 2-3; and Butkevich, *Obzor*, 426-432.

⁴² Stollov, "Neskol'sko slov o molokanakh," OZ, no. 6 (June 1870), 311.

“supremacy among the people in the congregation.”⁴³ In part, the discord reflected a personal confrontation between the Kolesnikov and Kashcheev families—tension that stemmed from competition in the business arena as well as struggles to lead the Baku Molokan community spiritually and administratively. Kolesnikov had arrived in 1862 as a poor orphan along with his two brothers. In the succeeding years, they had together amassed an enormous personal fortune through various trade and industrial ventures (particularly the burgeoning oil business), becoming merchants of the second guild. The Kashcheev family arrived in Baku a year later and they too became millionaires through the oil trade. As one Tiflis Molokan described the ensuing conflict: “These brothers [the Kolesnikovs] soon appeared as opponents of Kashcheev and his children, both in terms of things in the Church and also in issues of trade. Kolesnikov was able to quickly expand his commercial affairs. Kashcheev strongly came to hate Kolesnikov and there was in the church an uninterrupted twenty-five year quarrel.”⁴⁴ Kolesnikov and one of the Kashcheev brothers both vied for prominence in the Baku Molokan community, speaking frequently at services and meetings, acting as *nastavniki* and *presvitery*, and doing what they could to determine the spiritual direction of the community. However, much to Kashcheev’s frustration, it appears that the congregation more readily came to support Kolesnikov who possessed a wide knowledge of the Scriptures and even spent five years studying ancient Hebrew in order to read texts in the original. Nikolai Kudinov was not alone when he wrote: “without exaggerating, one can say that [Kolesnikov] in the Molokan world is one of the enlightened people.”⁴⁵ It also did not help Kashcheev’s cause that despite renown for his “*khlebosol’stvo*,” many considered him rude, power hungry, and self-serving.⁴⁶

In tandem with the conflicts between the Kolesnikovs and the Kashcheevs, there also appears to have been a series of spiritual and social struggles within the Baku Molokan community generally, the fallout from which helped to impel Kolesnikov to build his building. Divisions within the Molokan community in Baku grew to such a

⁴³ GMIR f. 2, op. 8, d. 237, 1910, l. 46.

⁴⁴ GMIR f. 2, op. 8, d. 237, 1910, l. 45-46. Snippets of information about the wealth and businesses of the Kolesnikovs and Kashcheevs can be found, for example, in *Kaspii* 2, no. 59 (May 30, 1882): 2 and *Kaspii* 2, no. 76 (July 23, 1882): 1; and RGIA f. 1287, op. 38, d. 3035, 1895-1907, ll. 5ob-6.

⁴⁵ Kudinov, *Stoletie*, 84.

⁴⁶ GMIR f. 2, op. 8, d. 237, 1910, ll. 45-46 and Kudinov, *Stoletie*, 73-79, 85.

degree in 1884 that word of the struggles was front-page news in at least one local newspaper. Efforts on the part of one unnamed Molokan elder to suspend another from the congregation—at least the second attempt in a few months—“produced a large commotion in the local Molokan community, which even to this moment cannot calm itself, and which is divided into two parties ...”⁴⁷

Third, it also seems clear that Kolesnikov proposed a new building—and found widespread support for it among the Molokan community—because of practical concerns of increasingly insufficient space for a growing congregation and the disrepair of one of the previous sites of worship. Before Kolesnikov built his prayer house, there were four locations in which the Baku Molokans met to pray and carry out various religious ceremonies, each of which was found in the private home of one of the congregation’s members. These four prayer locations served a population of approximately 1,000 Molokans (469 males and 493 females, according to the census of 1885).⁴⁸ During the trial before the Justice of the Peace in 1894, the renters declared that they had initially prayed in different locations because the community was too large to meet all together in any one place. They were happy to move their worship to Kolesnikov’s prayer house because it was larger than any other meeting space available for them in Baku.⁴⁹ At the same time, one of the private homes in which the Molokans met, belonging to Petr Khvorostvo, “fell into disrepair and was threatening danger,” and as a result these Molokans were happy to move their services into Kolesnikov’s house.⁵⁰

Finally, Kolesnikov’s efforts at church building were part of a larger, empire-wide transformation in Molokan religiosity towards purpose-specific buildings for prayer and worship. The specific causes of this change in religious practice are unclear from the sources. However, it is apparent that Kolesnikov’s case was far from unique and, rather, formed part of widespread religious reorganization. Similar efforts at Church-building can be seen in the South Caucasus outside of Baku. For example, in the town of Tiflis in the late nineteenth century, Molokans also constructed distinct prayer houses that would serve as the focal point of community activity and community institutions. The first

⁴⁷ *Kaspii* 4, no. 87 (April 21, 1884): 1.

⁴⁸ RGIA f. 1354, op. 3, d. 1267, l. 48ob.

⁴⁹ RGIA f. 1354, op. 3, d. 1267, l. 53ob. “Sudebnaia khronika,” *Kaspii* no. 12 (January 16, 1894): 3.

⁵⁰ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, ll. 4-4ob. Note the similarities with the Tiflis congregation, GMIR f. 2, op. 8, d. 237, 1910, ll. 66-71, 82-84.

Molokan congregation appeared in Tiflis in 1840 and from that time the two primary assemblies—Peski and Kuki, named for the neighborhoods in which they met—convened each week in one or another apartment or private house to worship.⁵¹ However, in the late 1880s and 1890s both the Kuki and Peski congregations bought land and built communal prayer houses. The Kuki Molokans began the process in 1888, erecting a two-story structure for worship. The Peski Molokans followed in 1897 when fire burned down the residential house in which they had been meeting for over forty years. Seizing upon this opportunity, the congregation came together and collectively paid 12,000 rubles for a two-story house that they considered to be a communally owned place for prayer.⁵²

Similar processes were also at work in Molokan settlements in rural Transcaucasia. Beginning in 1897 and continuing through until 1905, the Molokans of Nizhnie Akhty (Erevan province) petitioned the authorities on at least four occasions for permission to open a prayer house in their village.⁵³ In this story, we see the shift in Molokan attitudes towards designated prayer houses and the rising belief that they could no longer properly carry out their religious practices without an established architectural space. Although the Molokans had already built the prayer house before they began petitioning, the Ministry of the Interior repeatedly denied them authorization. The building remained closed and under police lock until 1905. In their various petitions, the villagers presented to the state many of the same reasons for the prayer house as did Kolesnikov. They underscored how they had previously met in private homes in order to carry out their worship, but that this situation was proving increasingly undesirable and untenable, and was preventing them from fulfilling their spiritual rites and obligations. The 1900 petition of Fedil Ivanovich Shubin noted the need for a separate, designated prayer house because of “constant and unceasing tear-flowing, tormenting sorrow and our sadness, of our children, about not having a prescribed house and no other asylum

⁵¹ Prior to 1853, all Molokans in Tiflis went to the Peski prayer meetings. However, with the enlargement of the Molokan population in the city, and an increase in the number of Molokans living outside the Peski district, especially in the Kuki region, Molokans from the latter neighborhood opened a second congregation near their homes. While the split into two congregations posed certain difficulties for the Tiflis Molokans their relations remained generally “harmonious” and, according to an influential Tiflis Molokan elder, “unanimously the two churches Peski and Kuki simultaneously met for one goal and to serve one Church.” GMIR f. 2, op. 8, d. 237, 1910, l. 82.

⁵² GMIR f. 2, op. 8, d. 237, 1910, ll. 66-71, 82-84.

⁵³ Nizhnie Akhty comprised 36 households. RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1905, d. 35, l. 11. For a brief description of the village of Nizhnie Akhty, see Kolosov, “Russkie sektanty,” 147.

necessary for prayer worship to God of those believing Christians.” In the final petition of 1905, the petitioners underscored that only with a designated, communal prayer house would they be able fully “to fulfill our religious feelings.”⁵⁴

Molokan church-building movements were present outside of the Caucasus as well. I have already noted the longstanding desire of the Don Molokans for such sacred structures.⁵⁵ Moreover, Molokans of the Siberian city, Blagoveshchensk, also dedicated an impressive looking church in 1908, “replete with polished marble columns/walls.” Like the Baku Molokans, their co-religionists on the Amur were successful economically, extremely wealthy, and played a very prominent role in urban life. Indeed, Blagoveshchensk was commonly known as a “Molokan city.”⁵⁶

A rising wave of requests for emigration from Molokans from a variety of locales in the South Caucasus underscores just how important prayer houses had become for this religious community in fin-de-siècle Russia. Beginning in the late-nineteenth century and then taking on a full force after 1900, Molokans in Transcaucasia evinced a strong desire to emigrate from Russia in search of a better life. As part of parcel of a larger package of complaints about tsarist treatment (that also included their opposition to military conscription, economic downturns as a result of the building of the railway in the region, and the example of the emigration of the Dukhobors to Canada), many Molokans also wished to leave Russia as a means to escape the restrictions on their faith, especially government prohibitions on separate prayer houses, that they felt prevented them from fully carrying out their religious beliefs and practices. Indeed, this very frustration, in part, did impel many Molokans to depart Russia at the turn of the century, most moving to California.⁵⁷ Moreover, indications of just how important the issue over special, communal prayer houses had become, can also be witnessed in other Molokan activities, such as the large number signatures attached to the various petitions for churches sent to

⁵⁴ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1905, d. 35, l. 3ob.

⁵⁵ Stollov, “Neskol’ko slov,” OZ.

⁵⁶ See a photograph of the Blagoveshchensk church in *Spiritual Christian Molokan News* no. 6 (January-February-March, 1994), 20. On the Molokans of Blagoveshchensk, see A. I. Klivanov, *History of Religious Sectarianism in Russia (1860s-1917)*, translated by Ethel Dunn (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), 184-196

⁵⁷ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1900, d. 69, ll. 3-3ob, 25-25ob, passim. On Molokan emigration, see also GARF f. 102, 5 d-vo, op. 1901, d. 509, 1901-1902 and GMIR f. 2, op. 8, d. 356, n.d. On Dukhobor emigration, see ... Woodcock and Avakumovic, and Woodsworth. ****

the government;⁵⁸ the crowds of Molokans who came to watch Kolesnikov's trial, overflowed out of the courtroom, and waited with bated breath for the resolution;⁵⁹ and the honors, praise, and rise in stature that Kolesnikov received as a result of his willingness to build the new prayer house, to offer it over to the Molokan community, and to suffer the slings and arrows of tsarist persecution for his faith.⁶⁰

The development towards church building culminated in 1915 when the Baku Molokans came together to erect a new prayer house, this one substantially bigger than Kolesnikov's. Sources indicate that three factors lead to this construction project. First and most importantly, Baku Molokans hoped to bring about the merger of their diverse communities who until then met each Sunday in five different locations as five different congregations, each with their own leaders and varying religious beliefs and practices. In this case, the church was both a symbol of the desire for unification and also the physical means by which it was to be brought about. In requiring the different communities to meet in the same space, there was a certain hope that this would begin to break down the differences among their communities.⁶¹ Second, they could not achieve this unification in Kolesnikov's church (re-opened after 1905) in part because he had fallen out of favor with the community and was shadowed by accusations of wrong-doing. Finally, the Molokans continued to suffer from a lack of space, "cooped up in cramped personal houses, with little air and little light, where it was not difficult to long for space, light, and air."⁶²

The 1915 church reflects the development of certain design elements and aesthetics that were evolving in the earlier church building endeavors both in Baku but especially in Tiflis. In particular, Molokans in the South Caucasus appear to have settled

⁵⁸ Eighty male Molokans signed one of the petitions sent to the MVD in support of Kolesnikov's proposal. The petitions sent in Nizhnie Akhty were supported by an even larger portion of the community. RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1899, d. 114.

⁵⁹ *Kaspii*, (January 16, 1894), 3.

⁶⁰ GMIR f. 2, op. 8, d. 237, 1910, l. 46; "Pis'mo k redaktsiiu," *Baku* no. 244 (November 1, 1915), clipped and included in RGIA f. 821, op. 133, d. 213, 1915, l. 19; and Kudinov, *Stoletie*, 84-85.

⁶¹ While many Molokans hoped to use this new prayer house as the physical foundations of greater unity, others realized that the simple fact of bringing the different communities together to pray under one roof would be only a very small first step. The differences in religious practice—what would actually take place within the church—also posed fundamental problems to the Molokans. One proposal called for a rotation of services in which each of the five congregations were entitled to lead the services every week. *Baku*, RGIA f. 821, op. 133, d. 213, 1915, ll. 5-5ob.

⁶² "Molokanskaia zhizn'," *Baku* no 202, (September 11, 1915) and "Pis'mo k redaktsiiu," *Baku* no. 244 (November 1, 1915), both found in RGIA f. 821, op. 133, d. 213, 1915, l. 5 and 19, respectively.

on a two-storied structure as appropriate for their churches, in which the lower floor was symbolically linked to the body and the upper floor to the spirit, a physical arrangement reflecting the “subordination of the flesh to the soul.” The building also demonstrated the Molokans’ opposition to decoration of any sort, with plain interior walls and outside elements. At the same time, as the Molokans moved out of praying in the cramped rooms of private apartments, they reveled in the “space and light” of the second floor which had tall ceilings and seventeen long windows on three sides of the prayer house. “One receives the feeling that as if people, weary in a tight darkness suddenly escaped into freedom, to the light.”⁶³

Entering the Public Sphere: Molokans as “Civil Society”

The development of Molokan interest in church building also represents the beginning stages of another transformation of Molokan life: the institutionalization of the Molokan religious community. This formalization, in turn, was part and parcel of the increasing role that Transcaucasian Molokans came to play in Russia’s fledgling public sphere. As they took the first steps in institution building (especially the construction of churches), Molokans came to take up a physical presence in the public arena; to expand their activities and agenda in the broader Russian and Caucasian social spaces. Their place in “civil society” was defined both by what they did—political participation, philanthropic work, economic lobbying, and the development of non-governmental organizations—and by what they demanded—greater civil rights and more freedom of action in Russian society—and the tactics by which they went about pushing for these rights. At the origin of both was the construction of churches.

Church Building as Community Building

In addition to being a crucial moment of change in Molokan religiosity—particularly the linkages between spirituality and architectural space—Kolesnikov’s efforts to build the prayer house represent the first act in a larger drama of

⁶³ “Molokanskaia zhizn’,” *Baku* no 202, (September 11, 1915) in RGIA f. 821, op. 133, d. 213, 1915, l. 5.

institutionalization, standardization, and community building on the part of the Molokans of the South Caucasus. This formalization was often embryonic and incomplete, particularly before 1905, and failed to achieve the Molokans' desired ends even by the end of the old regime.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the instance of Kolesnikov's church underscores how the flowering of Molokan religious and social life that followed in the wake of the 1905 religious-tolerance laws had its roots in this earlier period and did not appear *ex nihilo*.

Churches were consciously a first step, and a physical marker, of burgeoning efforts on the part of the Molokans to standardize their faith, the administration of their communities, and the relations among the different branches and geographic centers of the Molokan faith. The 1915 prayer house was intended to bring the Baku Molokans together; to force them to blend, as much as possible, their differences in belief and practice. Moreover, communal prayer buildings would act as the hub from which other institutional branches would extend. Part of Kolesnikov's original plan was to attach to his church a Molokan school that would then give the congregation the opportunity to educate their children outside of the state system and to provide a standard religious and cultural curriculum for Molokan youth.⁶⁵

Following from the shift to the building of prayer houses, and particularly after 1905 when the Molokans found themselves with unprecedented religious freedom, there came a series of other forms of institution building as the Molokans transformed from a marginal, persecuted religious community into an increasingly established group. Many of the Molokan communities in the South Caucasus came to register themselves officially with the state, documenting their prayer buildings as their communal anchor. Moreover, other congregations took on increasingly elaborate administrative structures and institutional practices. The Baku Molokans, for instance, drew up a charter for an official association with rules and regulations concerning the administration of the community

⁶⁴ These efforts at formalization were by no means uncontested even within the Molokan community, and the process was incomplete at the time of the 1917 revolutions. In 1905, for example, Kudinov championed the goals of community formalization and renovation, arguing that for the Molokan community to move forward, and to fix the problems that he sees as having developed over time within the community, he proposed education, institutionalization, and standardization of faith. Kudinov, *Stoletie*, 81, passim, OTHER ***.

⁶⁵ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, l. 81, l. 3; Kudinov, *Stoletie*, 81; and *Baku*, RGIA f. 821, op. 133, d. 213, 1915, l. 5ob.

and the functioning of their Society. The founding document laid out the goals of the organization: “The Society has as its goal to unite all spiritual Christians-Molokans living in Baku and in all of the Baku city region in a correctly organized Society for the development and fulfillment of the religious-moral and educational needs of its members and with the goal of mutual material support.” The document also described in detail the association’s rights, rules governing who could belong to the Society, its financial structures, administration, and the structures of meetings and special commissions.⁶⁶

The institutionalization project is vividly seen in two post-1905 undertakings. The first was a series of congresses that brought together Molokans in South Caucasus, and eventually Molokans from around the empire. These congresses had five prominent goals: to celebrate their heritage, discuss the finer points of their religious, plan how best to ensure the growth and longevity of their faith, build national ties among Molokans and between Molokans and other sectarian communities in Russia, and highlight in the eyes of the authorities all the good that the Molokans had done for Russia.⁶⁷ Second, after 1905, Molokans rapidly developed their publishing efforts in an endeavor to document their past and to standardize the beliefs and practices of their faith. They began to publish a number of periodicals dedicated solely to Molokan concerns, such as *Molokanin*, *Molokanskii vestnik*, *Dukhovnyi khristianin*, and later, during NEP, *Vestnik dukhovnykh khristian-Molokan*. At the same time there was an explosion in publication of prayer books, books on Molokan history, discussions of Christianity from the Molokan perspective, and explorations of Molokan life.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ RGIA f. 821, op. 150, d. 445, ll. 44ob-48, 50ob-51, 126-127ob, passim. *Ustav Bakinskogo Obshchestva dukhovnykh khristian (Molokan) goroda Baku i raiona Bakinskogo gradonachal'stva* (Baku: Tip. I. L. Shteinera, 1908).

⁶⁷ On Molokan congresses, see Kudinov, *Stoletie; Karsskii oblastnoi s"ezd dukhovnykh khristian 1-go, 2-go i 3-go iunia 1908 g v sel. Vladikarse, Karsskago uchastka i okruga* (Kars: Karsskaia Oblastnaia tip., 1908); *Otchet o Vserossiiskom s"ezde dukhovnykh khristian (Molokan), sostoiavshemsia 22 iulia 1905 goda* (Tiflis: 1907); "Vserossiiskii s"ezd molokan." *Missionerskoe obozrenie* X, no. 9 (June 1905): 1416; *Molokanin; Molokanskii viestnik*; 150-year celebration book. Blane, "Relations," 62. [NBB: precursors to these congresses in the 1840s and other] ****

⁶⁸ Of the numerous titles, see, for example, S. K. Zhabin, *K dukhovnomu svetu. Kratkii kurs Zakona Bozhiia dlia dukhovnykh khristian (postoiannykh molokan)* (Tiflis: 1912); *Kratkoe izlozhenie dogmaticheskoreligioznago ucheniia dukhovnykh khristian* (Tiflis: 1909); N. F. Kudinov, *Dukhovnye khristiane. Molokane. Kratkii istoricheskii ocherk* (Vladikavkaz: 1913); I. F. Kolesnikov, *Dogmaty i ustav dukhovnykh khristian molokanskago veroispovedaniia* (Baku: Tip. L. M. Volchkina, 1910); and P. A. Suvorov, *Uchebnik dukhovnykh khristian*, Izd. 1-oe (Baku: Tip. "Trud," 1915).

Civic Activism

As institutionalization continued, Molokans, especially in the South Caucasus, also took on an increasingly active role in the public life of the Russian empire. Kolesnikov's desire to build a church was part of a larger tendency to create public presence for themselves—to come out of the shadows and take on roles and a presence in the public sphere. The church would be a physical symbol of their entry into civic life—an entry that had already taken place, but which often lacked acknowledgement, and which would enlarge over time. In addition, it would act as an actual cornerstone of that civic life: a place to meet and a home base from which they could act in the public arena. As elsewhere, the legal climate affected Molokan civic activism. For Kolesnikov and many other Molokans, the changing religious laws of the 1860s onwards emboldened them to take on a more public communal persona. In 1870, for example, the Molokan Stollov from Tavria province underscored how the rulings of 1864 allowed him to carry out his faith more openly and to write articles in a journal such as *Otechestvennye zapiski* about his faith and the Molokan experience.⁶⁹

Baku Molokans had already begun to take on public roles in the economy through their active involvement in the oil business (and other industries) and the growth of conspicuous wealth. Kolesnikov's church building was both a manifestation of, and an outlet for, these growing riches.⁷⁰ Moreover, Molokans also became actively involved in local (and later national) politics. In the Baku town Duma in 1894, for example, four of the 53 members were Molokans (not unexpectedly two representatives each from the Kolesnikov and Kashcheev families). With this level of representation, Molokans held a disproportionately large presence in local affairs, with 7.6% of the seats when Molokans made up a little less than one percent of the town's population. Molokans also served disproportionately in the Lenkoran town Duma as a result of tsarist laws that dramatically restricted Muslim political activity. After 1905, a small number of Molokans were

⁶⁹ Stollov, "Neskol'ko slov," 312 and Solov'ev, *Polnyi krug*, 18-25. Rogge himself argued similarly, although not unexpectedly attaching a different valence, that the decrease in legal restrictions on the part of the state towards the sectarians had led the latter to act more overtly in society and to show the authorities less submissiveness. RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81.

⁷⁰ Comparison to the Moscow Old Believers, Rieber, *Merchants and Entrepreneurs*,

elected to the national Duma, again taking part in Russia's larger political arena to a degree not justified simply by their numerical presence.⁷¹

Molokans were also becoming more involved in national politics beginning in the 1870s with their public proclamations of support for the tsarist government and the tsar and his family. While many of these declarations of endorsement and adulation were used instrumentally, designed to attain one end or another, others appear to be relatively heart-felt affirmations of support. Whatever the origin, Molokans in late Imperial Russia were engaging with and utilizing an approved public discourse concerning the tsar and the tsarist administration. In one of hundreds of examples, the newspaper *Kaspii* noted that on May 19, 1883, "on the day of the celebration of the holy coronation of Their Imperial Highnesses, the Lenkoran Molokans assembled in a prayer house and carried out warmhearted prayers for the health and productivity of the Emperor and Empress."⁷²

Significantly, Molokans chose their prayer houses as the institutionalized site from which to vocalize many of these announcements. In doing so, they linked the development of churches with their increasingly prominent and public role in Russian life. On one hand, they underscored their physical, permanent presence through the prayer buildings. On the other hand, they also asserted a certain legitimacy for their faith by highlighting that they prayed for the royal family using Molokan rites. In doing so, they simultaneously indicated to a traditionally dubious state that, despite being religious dissenters, they could nonetheless be loyal and contributing members of tsarist society.

In tandem with this public voicing of their support for the tsar, Molokans in the Caucasus increasingly backed up these proclamations with works in the public sphere through philanthropic organizations. In 1881, one group of Baku Molokans proposed to build, through donations from their community, a children's orphanage and monument in Baku that would honor the recently murdered Alexander II.⁷³ This is also seen in their work to fund and administer an infirmary in Baku that was used to tend to the sick and

⁷¹ RGIA f. 1287, op. 38, d. 3045, 1895-1907, ll. 2-9; *Vsepodanneishii otchet o proizvedennoi v 1905 godu po Vysochaishchuiu povelenui Senatorom Kuzminskim Revizii goroda Baku i Bakinskoi gubernii* (St. Petersburg), 359; Zheltov***; and Robert Sloan Latimer, *Under Three Tsars: Liberty of Conscience in Russia, 1856-1909* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1909).

⁷² *Kaspii* 3, no. 65 (June 10, 1883): 2. Breyfogle, "Heretics and Colonizers," 186-188. Also *Kaspii* 1, no. 95 (December 9, 1881): 2. RGIA f. 821, op. 133, d. 213, 1915, l. 2 (Baku article); Kudinov, *Stoletie*, ***. RGIA f. 1284, op. 221-1885, d. 22, ll. 1-3ob.

⁷³ *Kaspii* 1, no. 95 (December 9, 1881): 2.

wounded from the southern front, and through donations to the Red Cross and to the Baku town government to carry out similar activities. Kolesnikov was once again at the forefront of the infirmity efforts in World War I, although his endeavors here appear to have gotten him into a great deal of trouble with the Molokan community.⁷⁴

Church Building and Molokan Civil-Rights Aspirations

In addition to being a significant component of institutionalization and activism in the public sphere, Kolesnikov's struggles to build his prayer house also reflect Molokan efforts to increase their civil rights and freedoms of opportunity in tsarist society. Indeed, as part of their efforts to entrench and expand their presence in the public sphere, Molokans strove both to safeguard the civil rights afforded them by tsarist laws, and where possible to expand those rights. From the 1880s to 1905, the question of church building became a central point of Molokan civil-rights demands and their challenges to the authority of the tsarist administration. Here too, Molokan public demands for greater rights moved in lockstep with the gradual shifts towards liberties and opportunities that the tsarist government took from the 1860s onwards. Combined with some of the political and judicial changes that formed part of the Great Reforms, these laws made possible the Molokans' increasingly aggressive and conscious struggle for rights within the tsarist political struggle.

Kolesnikov utilized three approaches to challenge the administrative decision that closed his prayer house, and thereby to protect and expand what he considered to be his civil rights. First, he took advantage of the newly developing legal structures of the post-reform period as a way to confront the powers of officialdom. Second, he attempted to manipulate the ambiguities and uncertainties of the post-1883 religious laws to his advantage, and to open up greater civil space for religious minorities by advancing a Molokan interpretation of the laws. Third, he shifted the discussion from religious questions to economic ones in an effort to expand the religious rights of Molokans by

⁷⁴ *Otchet komiteta po okazaniuu pomoshchi ranenym voenam pri Bakinskoi Obshchin Dukhovnykh Khristian (Molokan) c 7-go Sentiabria 1914 g. po 28-oe Fevralia 1915 g* (Baku: Tip. Bakinskago T-va Pechatnago Dela, 1915). See RGIA f. 821, op. 133, d. 213, 1915, ll. 1, 19 [baku article] for information about the traumas and internal conflicts the infirmity caused among the Baku Molokans. For a discussion of Molokans efforts in support of tsarist military efforts during previous wars, see Breyfogle, "Caught in the Crossfire?" *Kritika* 2, no. 4 (Fall, 2001): 713-50. Baptist article and others. On Molokans during WWI, see also Klivanov, 206-208. ***

demanding the economic rights that were due them, and which the tsarist government was in less of a position to deny.

Kolesnikov hoped to make use of the court system as a means to challenge the powers of the administration, here particularly Rogge, and to undo the sealing of his building. The Molokans saw the court system as a means to counter administrative orders and to create greater rights and opportunities for themselves, even if (as in Kolesnikov's case) they had only a wobbly legal leg to stand on. In doing so, the Molokans took advantage of the tensions of the Great Reform period, here particularly the frequent butting of heads between an independent judiciary and the policy goals of the administration with its traditions of governing by decree. These Molokan legal tactics sent chills through the spines of tsarist administrators in the South Caucasus. As Rogge himself noted about the Molokans in the Kolesnikov case:

they venture to act towards those decrees with sharp disdain and disobedience, and when the established organs of power, fulfilling instructions, . . . , obstruct the possibility for them to continue further their crimes, then they turn to the court in the form of a civil lawsuit, banking that on the soil of private civil law relations some sort of more propitious solution could be possible for them.⁷⁵

Indeed, Rogge was unnerved by this strategy, fearing what this kind of example would mean in the long term.

The very demands of explanation during the civil legal proceedings create for the sectarians a form of relations to the local authorities that is undesirable in the highest degree. It is also not without danger because it provides the sectarians the means to believe that the orders of the administrative authorities can be changed by the court authorities, and that which is strictly forbidden by the first, will be met with some sort of encouragement and patronage on the part of the second.⁷⁶

Sheremetev, agreed with Rogge's assessment of the danger that the courts posed to local authority. "Having in mind the greater guarantee of the prestige of the local authorities in the eyes of the sectarians," the Chief Administrator contacted the MVD directly in an

⁷⁵ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, l. 7ob.

⁷⁶ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, ll. 8ob-9.

effort to bring to bear his influence and have the MVD prevent the Senate from taking on Kolesnikov's case.⁷⁷

Within the context of the judicial system (and also through administrative channels), Kolesnikov strove to defend what he saw as Molokan rights and to push for greater liberties and privileges. Kolesnikov's appeal to build a prayer house reflects the blurry boundaries of tsarist religious laws, the Molokans' increasing legal savvy, and the manner in which they could utilize the spaces opened by the Great Reforms to challenge the system and push for greater freedoms. In arguing their cases, both Kolesnikov and the Molokans of Nizhnie Akhty demonstrated a very clear knowledge of the laws affecting their religious lives and the possibility to manipulate (often unsuccessfully) those laws to their advantage. They did what they could to navigate the ambiguous territory of tsarist policy towards religious minorities, and to take advantage of what it offered sectarians while trying to side step the remaining restrictions.⁷⁸ He chose three tacks to manipulate tsarist laws and administrative structures to his advantage. He argued forcefully regarding the comparative lack of rights for sectarians; he used his knowledge of the laws to bend their meaning, and his testimony, to his advantage; and he challenged religious laws through other means, here, by establishing economic rights.

In their endeavors to expand those rights, Kolesnikov and other Molokans used the very dearth of rights in comparison to other subjects as an argument for their case. As Kolesnikov's case makes clear, Molokans in the South Caucasus were keenly aware of their second-class status and lack of civil rights in comparison to other subjects. They believed them to be standing in the way of the attainment of their spiritual enlightenment,

⁷⁷ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, l. 2.

⁷⁸ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, l. 10; RGIA f. 1284, op. 221-1889, d. 92, l. 2; RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1899, d. 114, ll. 11, 16. [small examples here] Much like Kolesnikov's petitions and explanations, those of the Nizhnie-Akhty Molokans also reflect a high degree of knowledge about the laws that governed them and reflect a certain *savoir-faire* in presenting their case to state authorities. For instance, in one of the petitions, in 1902, the Molokan Iosef Alikseev Korolev underscores that the Molokan prayer house he requests would not in external appearance look like that of an Orthodox Church. In making this point, he closely cited the applicable articles of the 1883 laws reflecting a clear knowledge of them and an understanding of what might scare off state permission for the prayer house. Almost immediately following the Manifesto of February 26, 1903, which granted a variety of religious rights to tsarist subjects, Korolev sent in an addendum to the MVD once again making his request for the prayer house and now basing his claim on the more recent Imperial decree. RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1899, d. 114, ll. 11-11ob, 16. Similarly, the petition from Nizhnie Akhty Molokans Iakov Leonov and Vasilii Susosev of April 1905 directly mentions the December 12 1904 decree on religious toleration in support of their demands for the prayer house. RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1905, d. 35, l. 3.

economic well-being, philanthropic goals, and the ability for them to organize or institutionalize their communities.⁷⁹ As they entered into the public sphere, they wished to do so on terms relatively equal to others around them and felt that they had earned them. In his petition to the Emperor of 1889 requesting the permission to use the already-constructed building as a prayer house, Kolesnikov argued that the Molokans were denied many of the religious freedoms granted to other, even non-Russian, subjects and pushed to be eligible for those rights too.

Under your rule, all *inovertsy* ... have always and everywhere made use of religious freedom and freedom of worship [*svoboda bogosluzheniia*]. On the strength of High Mercy, given by You, all confessions can have their Temples and Prayer Houses and freely can carry out the rites according to their religious faith. But we, Spiritual Christians, belonging to the Molokan sect, are deprived of this great happiness and for carrying out prayer services of worship gather together in private residential houses.⁸⁰

Elsewhere the Molokans used a somewhat different tactic, asserting their belief that they deserved the opportunity to receive the prayer house because they had lived for fifty years in the South Caucasus, had proved themselves to be loyal subjects of the tsar, and would continue to live as such.⁸¹ Whether Molokans knew it or not, their logic should have struck a chord with St. Petersburg administrators. The Special Commission that developed the regulations of 1864 concerning sectarians also noted the disparity—which they considered unwanted—between the rights of Christian non-conformists and those of non-Christians who generally held much greater freedoms to carry out their religious practices.⁸²

In protecting and expanding Molokan rights, Kolesnikov was not unwilling to bend the truth of his case to push forward his goals. On one hand, at the trial he rightly underscored that being a practicing Molokan and meeting to worship according to

⁷⁹ Only with the manifestos of 1905 did they feel that their civil rights and religious rights were properly established. *Ustav*, 3-4.

⁸⁰ RGIA f. 1284, op. 221-1889, d. 92, l. 2. An almost identical sentiment is found in a Molokan-authored article: “while Jews have synagogues, and Muslims mosques, etc. , etc. ... the Molokans do not have the right to their own prayer house.” The author asks: “why does the benevolent government not permit these spiritual Christians to build prayer houses with tables for books and benches for sitting according to their simple teachings, so closely approaching the simplicity of the Gospels.” Stollov, “Neskol’ko,” 305.

⁸¹ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1905, d. 35, l. 3ob.

⁸² Iasevich-Borodaevskaia, *Bor’ba za veru*, 13, for example.

Molokan beliefs was no longer against the law, based on the rules of May 3, 1883. Certainly, both in the trial against him and in his lawsuit against Rogge, Kolesnikov made the argument that his building was a personal residence, not a prayer house, for which he had received permission from the town Duma. While not entirely untrue, Kolesnikov's assertion that this was simply a private residential home was stretching veracity. It is clear that from the outset that Kolesnikov intended to build a space, preferably separate and use-specific, for Molokan prayer services, worship, and other communal and religious functions. His assertions that the building was simply a residence reflect one (or both) of two possibilities. First, Kolesnikov, like many Molokans, may simply not have made the distinction between private home and church that the laws required him to make (and that many of the Christian faiths maintain) because, traditionally, Molokans had not made such distinctions in their theology. Thus, for Kolesnikov, the building could be both a dwelling and a sacred space simultaneously. Second, and more likely from my perspective, Kolesnikov's assertions may also have been an instrumental tactic. His was a conscious ploy, based upon the parameters given him by the laws, that provided him with a perfect legal foundation on which to make a claim both to have the building re-opened and to receive back payment for its rents. If the building was a private residence, then the Molokans had every right to worship there as and when they wished. Whatever the explanation, or some combination of the two, the nature of Russian laws which required a firm distinction between secular and sacred space created this gray zone in which Kolesnikov could press his case in defense of Molokan rights.

In tandem with this manipulation of Russian religious laws, Kolesnikov took another tack in his lawsuit against Rogge and his efforts to have his building re-opened. He brought his lawsuit to bear against Rogge based on laws concerning economic rights and freedom of trade, arguing that the governor had arbitrarily violated "his private interests, involving material losses." In this way, he attempted an end-run around the laws that might restrict Molokan religious practice and hoped to achieve his ends of greater religious freedom for the Molokans without actually having to confront the religious laws themselves. He claimed that he was losing as much 100 rubles a month from rents that he would otherwise have received from the Molokans who rented rooms in the building as residential space. At the same time, Kolesnikov claimed that because

the sealed building lacked either ventilation or renovation, he was threatened with the “complete destruction” of a house that cost more than 20,000 rubles.⁸³

The lawsuit, based on the economic losses, was even more of a stretch than Kolesnikov’s statement that the house was private and residential. As Rogge was quick to point out, Kolesnikov’s case was even undermined by his own testimony. On one hand, the tenants, with one exception, had been allowed to remain in the house and the closing of the large room should not have reduced Kolesnikov’s rents substantially. On the other hand, in his testimony before the Justice of the Peace, Kolesnikov declared that he had given the property for the use of the Molokan community (for worship and prayer) free and without charge. Rogge argued: “the contract by which he calculated his losses and which forms the foundation of the lawsuit is a fictitious act.”⁸⁴ That said, whether true or not is less important than the tactic itself that Kolesnikov employed. Here, Kolesnikov combined his use of the courts as a means to challenge administrative power. With the use of economic laws, he tried to uphold the religious rights that he believed the state had granted to Molokans, to push open those rights even further, and to enhance the presence of the Molokan community in the public sphere (and his role in that community).

⁸³ RGIA f. 1284, op. 222-1893, d. 81, ll. 6, 10ob-11.

⁸⁴ RGIA f. 1354, op. 3, d. 1267, ll. 47-47ob.