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Subbotniki (Judaisers)

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Subbotniki, also referred to as *zhidovstvuyuschie* (derived from *zhid*, a deprecating Russian term for a Jew) or *New Jews*, originated amongst manor peasants in the central regions of Russia between the 17th and 18th centuries. Evidence confirming communications between Subbotniki and the heresy *zhidovstvuyuschih* dates back to the 15th and 16th centuries. The first documentation concerning Subbotniki only date from the beginning of 18th century. Subbotniki (under various names) are mentioned in letters in the 1700's by the publicist and economist I. Pososhkova and by Metropolitan Dmitry Rostov who wrote about sectarians - *shchelnikah* in the Don region. Subbotniki were reported to celebrate Saturday rather than Sunday as the Sabbath and that they reject veneration of icons.

The 1770's and 80's, as well as during the reign of Catherine II, marked a favorable period for sectarianism, especially for the spread Subbotniki beliefs. The first official data about Subbotniki was gathered at the end of the 18th century. The Don Cossack Kosjakov in 1797, being on service, "has accepted Judaic belief" from a local Subbotniki teacher Phillip Donskogo, and after returning to Don he began to spread the new creed. Together with his brother, he addressed the court of the Atamanov Troops of the Don Army with the petition for freedom to practice of his faith (results are unknown).

At the beginning of 19th century, many residents of the city of Aleksandrova in the Caucasian foothills (later the city Aleksandrovsky Station in Stavropol Province) from merchant class refrained from execution of public duties on Saturdays. Accounting for the majority of the population, they avoided of any work on their holy day - later all population of a city was conscripted into the Khopersky Cossack Regiment. However, such a tolerant attitude by the administration to Subbotniki was an exception. At the beginning of 19th century when news appeared of concentrations of Subbotniki in the provinces outside the Pale of Settlement (in Moscow, Tula, Oryol, Ryazan, Tambov, Voronezh, Arkhangelsk, Penza, Saratov, Stavropol and in the Army of the Don), the authorities began to apply repressive measures. In the Voronezh province in the year 1806, a group of Subbotniki was discovered; the majority of them forcefully returned to Orthodoxy, while those who were not "broken" were turned over to the soldiers. According to official figures: there were 503 Subbotniki in 1,818 in the Voronezh province, in 1823, 3,771, and in 1889, 903). Subbotniki were found in Tula province (Kashirsky district) in 1811. Subbotniki declared they had practiced their beliefs since ancient times. In 1805 Subbotniki appeared in Bronitsky district in Moscow province. In 1814 there was a report of

Subbotniki in the city of Yelets, Oryol province. A community Subbotniki community existed in the city of Bendery, Bessarabsky province since 1818. In 1820 a number Subbotniki from the cities of Bendery were resettled in the Caucasus region where in the same year, Subbotniki families expelled from Ekaterinoslava were resettled.

After the Minister of Spiritual Affairs and National Education, Prince Alexander Golitsyn, submitted evidence that Jews were spreading their doctrine amongst the local population of the Voronezh province, the Cabinet of Alexander I approved measures “concerning unrestrained Jews in a house service of Christians”. In 1823 the Interior Minister Vladimir Kochubey presented information to the Cabinet about zhidovstvuyuschie (i.e. Subbotniki) and proposed measures to combat this sect which he reported totaled nearby 20,000s persons in different regions of Russia. In response to his proposals, the Synod {the institution manages the Orthodox Church} issued a decree in 1825 “about measures to against the spread of the disgusting belief of zhidovstvuyuschie sects by the name Subbotniki.” Under this decree, all proselytizers of the heresy were immediately called up for military service, and those unsuitable for military service were banished to settlements in Siberia; the Jews expelled from districts in which the sect had been found, and henceforth under no pretext were they permitted to stay there. Subbotniki were not issued {internal} passports as a means of restricting their movement around the country and thus communicating with Jews; prayer meetings were forbidden as well as conducting ceremonies of circumcision, wedding, burial, etc, that were not in the approved fashion of the Orthodox Church. As a result of these prosecutions, many Subbotniki *formally* returned to the Orthodox Church, while continuing to observe ceremonies and customs of their Subbotniki belief in secret.

The Subbotniki situation worsened with the ascent of Nicholas I to the throne and the decree of December, 18th 1826 acceding to the Orthodoxy and again accusing them of indulging in heresy. Some Subbotniki (sometimes the whole village), who openly admitted their membership in the sect, moved to the northern foothills of Caucasus, Transcaucasia and to Irkutsk, Tobolsk and Yenisei provinces and to the Amur province after the Siberian region of *Priamurye* was annexed by Russia in 1858. In 1842 rules were developed that resettled Subbotniki in newly conquered lands in the Caucasus. In 1850 the sect was widely adopted in the Kuban area. With hard work and entrepreneurial spirit, the Subbotniki founded prospering villages and helped revitalize the commercial life of Transcaucasia, which also led to their success in spreading their beliefs among other Russian colonists, often same as if they were exiled sectarians..

A lot of *hidden Subbotniki* remained in the areas the Subbotniki exiles vacated. After Alexander's II accession when repressive laws against all sectarians were rarely enforced, most of the Subbotniki in the central Russia (especially in areas of former concentration – Voronezh, Tambov, etc. provinces) ceased to conceal their faith. In Stavropol province, the Subbotniki faith openly declared itself in 1866, referring to the freedoms given by the manifesto on the occasion of coronation. In Voronezh province, Subbotniki came out of hiding in 1873. When 90 members of sect in Pavlovsk district were sentenced to deprivation of all rights of the state and resettlement to Transcaucasia, inspecting Senator S. Mordvinov, having given them good reports, petitioned for sentence to be annulled. A decree was issued in 1887 concerning the lawful recognition from the civil point of view of the most important rights of private life for sectarians. While the manifesto on freedom of worship (issued on April, 17th 1905) put an end to

all laws directed against Subbotniki, administrators, often mixing them with Jews, still applied restrictions to them; the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued circulars in 1908 and 1909 explained that *zhidovstvuyuschie* have the identical rights as the rest of population. At the beginning of the 20th century, Subbotniki communities existed in 30 provinces of the Russian Empire and totaled tens of thousands of people (the official statistics up to the Manifesto on the Freedom of Worship of April, 17th 1905 was obviously incomplete, as sectarians, and especially Subbotniki, which the authorities considered as "harmful sect", evaded registration). Since the 1880's – early 1890's, there was a movement amongst the Subbotniki for resettlement in "*Eretz Israel*", and whole families (Dubrovin, Kurakin, Protopopov, Matveev, etc.) settled in the Jewish agricultural settlements, mainly in Galilee where eventually, over two-three generations, they were absorbed into the Jewish population. Initially Subbotniki developed as a typical, radical anti-Trinity movement. Subbotniki rejected the Christian faith, and the Old Testament was at the heart of their dogma. It included a prohibition of their live of slavery, motives of accusation of ruling classes, as well as monotheism (as opposed to the Trinity) and rejection of "idols" (icons). Some Subbotniki considered Jesus as one of the prophets but not as God. Within the faith, they aspired to carry out Biblical requirements (circumcision, celebrating of Saturday Sabbath and the Jewish holidays, food, and other taboos) that made their faith similar to Judaism. However, teachings and practices in various provinces were different and each had their own specific characteristics. As testified the 1825 Synod decree, "the essence of the sect does not represent the full identity of the Jewish faith." This explains the desire and efforts of Subbotniki to adopt doctrine forms directly from Jewish teachings, especially in the second half of the 19th century.

There were various and often incompatible Subbotniki factions (sub-sects). Their emergence was prompted by a number of the factors: there were no consistent line of communications between Subbotniki and Jews who did not have the right to reside outside the Pale of Settlements; since Subbotniki lived in scattered locations, communication between them was difficult; and groups of Subbotniki appeared at various times and each had a different genesis.

These Subbotniki factions can be categorized into two groups:

- (1) *Actual* Subbotniki (i.e. those who converted to Judaism or Judaism in Galakhov) and
- (2) Christian sects celebrating Saturday Sabbath and complying with certain requirements and rituals of Judaism.

The first group includes:

1. **Subbotniki** in the Kuban also known as *Psaltirschikami*, which in the Russian legislation at the start of the 20th century were called "субботниками иудейского вероисповедания" (Subbotniki of the Judaic creed). They rejected all provisions of Christianity and aspired to fulfill Old Testament requirements, including circumcision. At the end of 18th century – beginning of 19th century, they tried to establish contacts with the Jews, and some of them even undertook *Giyur* {formal conversion to Judaism}. In the middle of 19th century, Subbotniki institutionalized (via communities, teachers, instructors, oral tradition) certain religious teachings. Most of them continued to evolve towards Judaism: many communities adopted elements of the Jewish worship (tallith, tfillin, observance of mitsvot according to Galakhov) and liturgies (prayers in

Hebrew). This trend intensified at the end of 19th century – early 20th century. According to official statistics, on January, 1st, 1912 there were 8,412 such Subbotniki people.

2. **Geres**, also called *Talmudistami* or *Shapochnikami* (for their custom of wearing a hat even inside a house): Jewish sources tell of many cases of prostylizing among Russian and Ukrainians in the late 18th century - early 19th century. In the biography of Rabbi Nachman Bratslava *Haej Ma-haran* (1874), N. Shternhartsa (1780—1845) states that in 1805 there were many reports of Christians converting to Judaism because they found contradictions in the holy books. Official Russian statistics did usually characterize Geres Subbotniki as strictly observing mitzvahs or formal passage of *Giyur*. On January 1, 1912 of the 12,305 zhidovstvuyuschie persons, 9,232 were possibly Geres according to the 1897 census. They aspired to fully merge with the Jews and encouraged marriages with them and sent their children to yeshiva {schools that teaches Torah, Mishnah and Talmud}. The centers of their concentration (Kuban, Transcaucasia) existed in the early 20th century. The first conference of Zionists of the Caucasus was held in Tiflis in 1901. Z. Lukjanenko was a delegate from a village of Mihajlovsky, Kuban area, and in village the Zima (Irkutsk province) there was the Zionist organization which has sent the representatives the 1919 3rd Vsesibirsky Zionist Congress in Tomsk. Although their numbers decreased considerably during a Soviet period, they continued to exist in the 1970's and 80's, in Siberia (in Zima was minyan until the end of the 1970's), in the Voronezh and Tambov areas, the Northern Caucasus (Maikop district) and in Transcaucasia (the city of Sevan, former Yelenovka in Armenia, Privolnoy village in Azerbaijan, Sukhumi town and other settlements).

A special phenomenon represents the evolution Subbotniki under the leadership of Geres in the Voronezh region during the Soviet period where in 1920, Subbotniki lived in 27 villages. From 1920 to 1921 Subbotniki from settlements in Ozerki, Klepovka, Gvazda, Buturlinovka, Upper Tishanka and others moved to the former landowners' estates and formed two separate settlements – Ilyinka and Vysokii. The isolation of residence, cohesion and strong spiritual leadership led to a large part of the population there completely accepting Orthodox Judaism and identifying themselves as Jews. In Ilyinka during the 1920's, there was an agricultural commune with a Saturday holiday called Еврейский крестьянин (“The Jewish peasants”) - the collective farm which after consolidation was included into collective farm systems was called "Russia". Jews came there often in the 1920's to help with religious education and the establishment of a religious life. In approximately 1929 Zalman Liberman arrived in Ilyinka to help with various duties including shoheta ritual (animal slaughtering), circumcision, teaching Hebrew and Khazzan. He established a site for the production of *tsitsit Tallit* {the fringes worn the corner of garments as a reminder of their identity as Jews} for Moscow, Leningrad and other cities, and also delivery kosher meat to Voronezh and nearby settlements. In 1937 Liberman was arrested and died in prison, the synagogue was closed, four scrolls of Torah were removed - two of which were later returned. In the 1930's during the processing official documents, some inhabitants of these settlements (especially Ilyinka) entered "Jew" in the "nationality" column on civil status registration forms. According to research conducted in 1960's by Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, even amongst the less orthodox residents of Vysokii, of 247 boys of preschool age, only 15 had not been circumcised in 1963; and in 1965 on Yom-Kippur nobody in this settlement went to work. In Ilyinka all newborn boys were circumcised (for this purpose they went to Voronezh and the Caucasus), there have been no cases of a mixed marriages, Saturday and Jewish holidays are observed, and they are also partially kosher (only at home).

During the period of 1973 to 1991, in this settlement the majority of inhabitants of Ilyinka left for Israel.

3. **Subbotniki-Karaimity**. In Tambov province they were called *Staroiudeyami* (Old Jews) or *Besshapochnymi* : They do not recognize the Talmud as the only source of belief and faith is the Old Testament. The sect arose in about 1880 under the influence of Crimean Karaites {a community of ethnic Turkic adherents of Karaite Judaism - a Jewish movement that crystallized in Baghdad and is characterized by the recognition of the Tanakh as its scripture, and the rejection of Rabbinic Judaism and the Mishnah and the Talmud as binding}. On January, 1 1912, they numbered 4,092 persons. Between 1905 and 12 according to official figures, the sect has more than 30 persons. After 1913 tougher laws prevented the acceptance by Christians of non Christian creeds. In 1910's these Subbotniki had religious and Karaite liturgical a literature printed in Russian; they lived in the Saratov, Tambov and Astrakhan provinces, on Altai and in the Kuban region. In the 1960's there were reports of members of this sect living in Astrakhan and Volgograd, were registered as Karaites.

Christian factions of Subbotniki include:

1. **Subbotnik-Molokans** represent one of branches of the Molokane. During the early period of Molokane, in 18th century, there was strong influence of Judaism coming from S. Uklein. However because of difficulties posed by laws and prohibitions against Judaism, Uklein was not able to influence the entire community although his closest pupils did follow him. His successor, Sundukov of Saratov province, supported more resolute rapprochement with Judaism and caused a rift in sect. Followers of Sundukov received name Subbotnik-Molokans. Although they recognized the New Testament Gospel, they observed the Saturday Sabbath as well as other Judaic holidays and adhered to Old Testament food proscriptions. On January, 1st 1912 there were 4,423 Subbotnik-Molokans {in Russia}.

Subbotnik-Molokans actually represented an intermediate sect between Christianity and Subbotniki (Judaism). Within Pryguny or Jumpers, another Molokane sect, there was a move toward the adoption of the Mosaic Law in the 1860's – 70's, children were given Biblical names, Saturday and some Old Testament feasts were observed and there were disputes over the necessity of circumcision as pointed out by N. Dingelshtadt in *The Transcaucasian Sectarians in their Family and Religious Life* published in St. Petersburg, 1885. Many Jumpers seriously considered converting to Subbotniki, recognizing their belief was more in accordance with the Scriptures. Many Subbotnik-Molokans and Pryguny subsequently became in Judaic Subbotniki and even Geres.

2. **Christian Subbotniki** – the sect which has arisen in the Tambov region in 1926 as branch Adventism.

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