

The Subbotniks Russians with mosaic Religion

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To the services in the synagogue of Birobidzhan¹ also come Russians – bearded men with typical Jewish Kipa² on the head and old women. About 200 Russians who profess to a mosaic religion live in the vicinity of Chabarovsk,³ the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region in the Far East. They are members of the Subbotniks community, the so-called Sabbatarians. The Russian language has added one more neologism⁴ from the Soviet time which sounds just the same but meaning a voluntary deployment of labor for municipal projects on a Saturday. However, this meaning has nothing to do with this community.

The Subbotniks were first mentioned in official documents as a sect at the beginning of 18th century. The Russian theologian and sect researcher Saint Dimitrius of Rostov (1645 – 1709) writes in his work "Rosysk" that the Subbotniks fast on Saturdays in Jewish fashion and that they do not recognize the icons of the Orthodox Church.

They were considered to be heretics and sectarians by the Lutherans, Calvinists as well as the Jews. In the Russian legislation of 1811 the Subbotniks were termed "Jewish Heretics" after the movement of the same name of end of the 16th century in Novgorod. The sect originated in about 1796 in six villages in the vicinity of Bobrovsk and Pavlov in the [center of the] province of Voronezh. The farmers did not recognize the dogmas of the Russian Orthodox Church and protested against the inhuman bondage policy⁵ across the country that Church endorsed and supported.

In a search for a "true" religion that they could adopt, they turned to the Old Testament. In the Books of Moses,⁶ the Subbotniks found ideas which corresponded to their own beliefs. The most applicable suggestion was the condemnation of slavery and the *Gtzendienstes*.⁷

The Sabbatarians rejected Jesus Christ as the Messiah, because he did not relieve their people from the earthly sufferings. They recognized Jesus not as a son of God, but as one of the prophets of man. They do not accept the teaching of the Trinity. From the doctrines of Judaism the Subbotniks adopted circumcision curtailment and other dogmas and complex rites.

Editors Notes (B.A. 2006):

¹ In 1934 the Soviet Government established the Jewish Autonomous Region, popularly known as Birobidzhan, in a sparsely populated area some five thousand miles east of Moscow. Designated as the national homeland of Soviet Jewry, Birobidzhan was part of the Kremlin's effort to create an alternative to Palestine. The Jewish Autonomous Region still exists today. See <http://www.swarthmore.edu/Home/News/hiro/html/panel01.html>

² Yarmulke

³ A Russian city on the Chinese border

⁴ A newly coined word

⁵ serfdom

⁶ Old Testament

⁷ The word *Gtzendienstes* appears in the German version of the Bible in I Corinthians 10:8 referring to "adultery and fornication" being the cause of death of 23,000 people.

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During the reign Catherine II (1762 – 1796) the sect found many converts in the provinces of Moscow, Tula, Oriol, Riazan, Ekaterinoslav, Tambov, Archangelsk, Saratov, Stavropol and Astrakhan.

According to official information from the year 1818, 503 persons adhered to the sect of the Subbotniks; by 1823 this had grown to 3771 members. The authorities branded the Sabbatarians as a "very harmful" sect. In 1825 the government enforced repressive measures against the "heretics": Active preachers were conscripted into the army. Those unsuitable for military service were exiled to Siberia in the provinces of Irkutsk, Tobolsk and in the Jenissej.

The liberties and freedoms of the sect members within the empire were limited, as no passports were issued to them. Without a passport the farmers were not permitted to leave their places of residence even for a short time. It was strictly forbidden for the Subbotniks to carry out the circumcision rite as well as their style religious services, weddings and funerals other than in accordance with Russian Orthodox Church rites.

To subject the Subbotniks to anti-Semitic discrimination and humiliation by the Christian population, they were labeled a "Jewish sect." These repressive measures were also applied to the Jewish minorities in the places where the Subbotniks lived. Without exception all Jews were expelled from areas where the Subbotniks lived. Jews were forbidden to live nearby the Subbotniks. In 1826 entire villages with "heretical" inhabitants were evacuated to the Caucasus.

Only in 1887 was the sect officially recognized. The manifesto of the czar was issued on the 17th of April, 1905 announcing the freedom of the belief lifted all bans and restrictions on the dissidents in the Russian empire for a certain time. In the Soviet time the Subbotniks communities went underground and lived produced, quietly and outdistances compared with the environment. The watchful eye of the "local authorities" simply overlooked them. In the underground society the Subbotniks have survived the atheistic state.

The Sabbatarians are recognized as *Ger*⁸ by Orthodox Jews. This gives them the opportunity as "half-Jews" to emigrate to Israel. Some Subbotniks of Birobidzhan, in light of the economic crisis in the region, have exercised their rights and have emigrated from Far East to Middle East.

<http://62.5.183.114/Religion/2001/03/23/11.57.12.htm>

⁸ Ger (plural Gerim) meaning "stranger/foreigner" in Hebrew