

ASTRAKHAN MOLOKANS AND DOUKHOBORS.

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I.

The Appearance of Uklein in the Astrakhan Province. — The conveniences offered by this region for the peaceful settlement of Molokans. — The beginning of Molokanism in the Tsaritsyn district. — The village of Prishib. — The appearance of Molokan settlers in the Astrakhan province. — Molokan villages: Vyazovka, Solodniki, and Svetly Yar. — The Chernoyarsk district at the time of the emergence of Molokanism. — Molokans in the city of Astrakhan. — Methods of spreading Molokanism. — The number of Molokans in the Astrakhan region in the 18th century. — Astrakhan Doukhoborism. Gavriil Sorokin. The confession of faith of the Molokans of "Prishib Village." The government's opinion on the Astrakhan Molokans.

By the decree of Catherine II on December 14, 1762, dissidents who had fled abroad or were within Russia were allowed to settle in the Siberian province near Tobolsk, on the Karabinskaya steppe, in the jurisdiction of the Ust-Kamenogorsk fortress, along the rivers Uba, Elba, Beretsovaya, Glubokaya, and other tributaries of the Irtysh; in the Astrakhan province, from Saratov up the Volga to the Razdory tract, Zaukoyskaya, Rvoyna, near the rivers Tishana, Vertuban, Irgiz, Berezovaya; along the Volga from Saratov downstream to the rivers Mukhari-Tarlik, Menyshiy-Tarlik, Bolshoy Tarlik, between the latter and Kamyshev Buerak, near the Buerak itself, near Eruslan and Yablonny Buerak; in the Orenburg province along the rivers Sakmara, Samara, along the Volga from the city of Samara to the mouth of the Irgiz; in the Belgorod province in the Valuysky district along the rivers Zhuravka, Derkul, Bitka, and Oskol. With this decree in mind, Uklein undertook a journey in the 1770s through the Saratov and Astrakhan provinces, combining the propagation of his teachings with the goal of inspecting the areas of these provinces, especially Astrakhan, as the most remote from the center of Russia, and thus offering a quiet life for those wishing to relocate there, Molokans persecuted in the inner provinces. Upon arriving in the Astrakhan province, he found the following conveniences for the resettlement and establishment of Molokans there.

The Astrakhan province was primarily populated and continued to be settled by a diverse mix of peoples: Armenians, Tatars, Kirghiz, Kalmucks, Turkmens, Karakalpaks, Mordvins, Chuvash, Persians, Georgians, Greeks, Poles, Jews, Germans, and only a small portion of Little Russians and Russians. This diversity itself facilitated the peaceful practice of the Molokan faith among these peoples, which often faced persecution from Orthodox authorities in the inner provinces and local clergy, even rural authorities. The Akhtuba River, along which Uklein traveled, running parallel to the Volga, constantly branched into many tributaries in the Astrakhan province, irrigating vast fertile valleys, often stretching up to 50 versts, dotted with lakes, streams, and channels, into which many ravines with water also flowed. Here, the wheels of flour mills (a long-favored occupation of Molokans) were already turning, and grain was harvested in unprecedented abundance; extensive oak groves lining the banks of the Akhtuba promised excellent building materials for settlers; poplars, aspens, mulberries, and willows were scattered everywhere between the lakes and across the valleys; the grass grew unusually tall, hay untouched by anyone, vast fishing grounds, and the steppe's expanse—all this displayed nature's generosity, promising a rich existence for settlers who could call their own everything that a free hand could take and use for their benefit... Near the Akhtuba in the Tsarevsky district, in a beautiful lowland valley, stood a mulberry garden covering 10 dessiatins of land, planted by Volga Bolgars and flourishing especially during the Golden Horde's power. Peter I established a mulberry factory here in 1720 and founded settlements for sericulture from rootless, runaway, and rural people: "Verkhne-Akhtubinskoye" and "Sredne-Akhtubinskoye." Molokans who later resettled here became some of the best sericulturists. Across the vast valleys between the Akhtuba and the Volga, wild mulberries grew abundantly, their ripe fruits, left unused, falling to the ground and carried by spring waters along with silt, giving rise to new trees. Along the middle of the Tsarevsky district, towards the Elton Lake along the so-called "salt transport route," lone farmsteads or hamlets of Little Russians, Mordvins, Chuvash, assigned to the category of salt miners, were visible, offering a tempting prospect for conversion to Molokanism in the absence of Orthodox churches and clergy, which the Molokans who later settled here indeed achieved... The Krasnoyarsk and Astrakhan districts consisted more of isolated settlements, whose inhabitants knew and saw little of authorities and clergy, living among lakes overgrown with reeds, under the shade of dense groves, as completely free people. All this made a strong impression on Uklein, who, upon returning to the Tambov province, described the Astrakhan region, especially the areas irrigated by the Akhtuba River, in the most attractive terms and advised the Molokans to relocate there for a peaceful life. The Molokans followed his advice, and from that time on, the Akhtuba region became their promised El Dorado, where they eagerly sought to settle in subsequent years; the time of peaceful life in these places is still considered by Molokans as their golden age.

In which places of the Astrakhan province and how many people Uklein converted to Molokanism during his journey, we cannot provide exact information due to a lack of sources, but it is certain that in the village of Prishib, Tsarevsky district, he had considerable success. The Tsarevsky district, however, did not yet exist at the time of Uklein's journey through the

Astrakhan province. It was only opened in 1835 and was part of the Saratov province until 1850, when it was finally transferred to the Astrakhan province upon the formation of the Samara province. The founding of the Tsarevskaya sloboda, later renamed a town, dates to a time after Uklein, specifically to 1805, when settlers from the Pavlovsky district of the Voronezh province, initially settled in the Vostochny district of the Saratov province, moved to the Akhtuba and, enlisted as transporters of Elton salt, settled in this area. But the location where this sloboda was founded belongs to the most important historical sites. Here was the capital of the Golden Horde khans, "Sarai," founded by Batu in the first half of the 13th century, whose existence is still evidenced by the mounds scattered around the church about 20 versts from the village of Prishib to the village of Rastagaevka, or Kolobovidnaya.

As for the village of "Prishib," at the time of Uklein's arrival, it consisted of Cossacks and runaway people from various provinces, who were the first listeners of Uklein's new teachings... After the resettlement of Tambov Molokans to the Akhtuba, the village of "Prishib" became the root of Akhtuba Molokanism and was respected as the place where Uklein personally stayed and sowed the first seeds of Molokanism... From that time on, the Prishib Molokans played an important role among the Astrakhan Molokans until later times and submitted to the government, on behalf of all Astrakhan Molokans, one after another "confessions of faith," one of which we will present below.

In the 1780s, when the attractive and advantageous locations of the Astrakhan province became known to the Molokans through Uklein in the Tambov, Voronezh, and Ryazan provinces, the Molokans of these provinces, with or without the permission of the authorities, began to relocate to the Akhtuba and Alatyr rivers and form farmstead settlements among lakes overgrown with dense shrubs, connected by narrow and shallow channels on small elevations formed by the Volga and Akhtuba rivers, representing an extensive valley of countless islands overgrown with reeds, so that by the 1790s, many Molokan settlements were already visible along the banks of the Akhtuba and Alatyr rivers. At the same time, along the Uzen and Irgiz rivers of the present Samara province, Old Believers returning from Poland and state peasants from the Voronezh, Tambov, Ryazan, and other provinces settled at state expense; many plots of land and sea waters were granted to them free of charge as property. In 1785, by a decree of May 9, the Governor-General of Saratov and the Caucasus, Potemkin, was ordered to particularly strengthen the settlement of the steppes between Tsaritsyn, Cherkassk, and the Caucasian line. Thus, with such a strong demand for settlers, they no longer strictly scrutinized those coming from other provinces and did not ask whether they had permission to leave their previous places; as a result, the region was settled by various service people, exiles, vagabonds, rootless and homeless individuals, ordinary Old Believers, and Doukhobors and Molokans who did not make themselves known. The latter, settling in various parts of the province, soon showed their influence by converting many villagers to Molokanism. In the 1790s, as seen from the report of the Astrakhan Governor to the Minister of Internal Affairs, Molokanism was already present, among other places, in the following villages of the Astrakhan province: Solodniki, Svetly Yar,

Vyazovka, and others, in which Molokanism was officially declared in 1792, 1796, and 1797, respectively, but unofficially it existed earlier. Thus, independently of the Tsarevsky and Chernoyarsk districts, the 1790s already had Molokans, and not in just one place.

In what state was the Chernoyarsk district in the second half of the 18th century? At the time of Uklein's appearance there in the 1780s, it was already a district of the Astrakhan province, and its settlement, especially the city of Chernoyarsk, dates back to the 17th century, when in 1627 it was founded by voivodes sent from Moscow, Andrey Glukhov and Matvey Lvov, and served as a fortress, or as it was then called, an "ostrog," whose purpose was to protect Russian Volga caravans from attacks by nomadic peoples and Cossack gangs.

In 1717, the Chernoyarsk district was once again opened as a district of the Astrakhan province, and civil administration was established there with the appointment of a strict commandant only in 1760. In the 1790s, with the spread of Molokanism in this district, it found its followers mainly among state peasants.

In the 1790s, Molokans also appeared in the city of Astrakhan itself, among whom were the blacksmith Vasily Starov, a native of Astrakhan, and the retired soldier and gardener, the tradesman Akindin Sokolov.

The city of Astrakhan was at this time (since 1785) a provincial city of the Caucasian Viceroyalty and became a provincial city only in 1802, subordinated to the military authorities of the Caucasus and Georgia.

At the beginning of the 18th century, Astrakhan did not even have any higher administration, and in 1708, the city was listed as a provincial city of the Kazan province.

Molokans spread their teachings in the Astrakhan region at the end of the 18th century secretly, unnoticed, but nevertheless successfully and effectively. With the Bible in hand, they appeared on farms or fishing grounds and started conversations about faith, beginning to read the Bible and interpret passages that supported their teachings. "Think about it," they would say—and still say—to the Orthodox, "who and for what purpose invented your church rituals and statutes? They were invented by your priests for their own gain. A child is born, you pay the priest for baptism; but we ourselves read prayers, give names, and the money stays in our pockets; for weddings, funerals, and prayers, you pay the priests, but we do it ourselves, without great expense." One peasant of the Astrakhan province, Sadovsky, as he himself reported to the authorities, once had Molokans come to him with books when he was at a fishing ground, and they began to read and interpret the Bible. Sadovsky listened to the readings and interpretations but reported the visitors to the authorities. We do not have exact information on the number of Molokans in the Astrakhan region in the past 18th century, but we can assume that their number, with those who migrated from the inner provinces, was quite significant, as can be concluded, among other things, from the fact that in the first decade of the current 19th century, according to the governor's report, in the village of Prishib alone, there were 772 Molokans of both sexes.

Therefore, if we assume that only a third of this number existed in Prishib at the end of the 18th century, and two-thirds appeared in the first decade of the 19th century, then even then, in this place alone, there must have been more than 200 Molokans before 1800.

We cannot say definitively how many Doukhobors there were in the Astrakhan province in the 18th century, due to the fact that Molokans and Doukhobors were often confused by both the government and the people as one sect. However, we have an indication of the existence of Doukhoborism in the Stavropol district, which was then part of the Astrakhan province. Here, at the end of the 18th century, among other secret Doukhobors, was Gavriil Sorokin, who eventually declared himself to the government.

This Sorokin was a merchant and a Ratman in the city of Alexandrovsk and, long supporting the Doukhobors in the 1790s, finally declared himself openly a Doukhobor, for which, by the highest decree, he was resettled to the "Milky Waters," to prevent, as stated in the decree, the scandal that could arise from such a public act leading to Doukhobor freedoms, and with enrollment in the peasant tax along with other Doukhobors settled on the "Milky Waters," without, however, receiving stone assistance, which, according to the decree, Sorokin did not deserve due to his behavior. This Gavriil Sorokin, a personality who later played a significant role in Doukhoborism, will be encountered again when we discuss the Doukhobors settled on the "Milky Waters." The characteristic of the teachings of the Astrakhan Molokans at the end of the 18th century can be seen, among other things, in the "Confession of Faith" submitted to the government by the Molokans of Prishib village, although this confession, due to its brevity, does not fully encompass the entire Molokan teaching. Here is this confession.

CONFESSION OF FAITH

Spiritual Christians of Prishib.

- 1) We believe in the head of faith and the perfecter, Jesus, excluding for ourselves a priest and a single bishop, who sits at the right hand of God.
- 2) We are marked by the promised Holy Spirit, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.
- 3) We accept spiritual baptism according to the word of Holy Scripture. "I indeed baptize you with water," said John the Baptist, "but He who comes after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry: He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:7-8).
- 4) On prayer, Christ showed His disciples to pray thus: "When you pray, say: Our Father, who art in heaven" (Luke 11:2), and the Apostle wrote to the Ephesians: "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:18).

5) We have a temple according to the Scripture of Moses in the 5th book: "Look down from heaven, Your holy habitation"; in the prophet Isaiah 63:15 it is said: "Look down from heaven, and see from Your holy and glorious habitation"; the prophet Baruch in chapter 2:16 wrote: "O Lord, look down from Your holy habitation upon us"; in Psalm 79:14 it is said: "O God of hosts, return, we beseech You, look down from heaven and see"; and in Psalm 33:13: "The Lord looks down from heaven, He sees all the sons of men." — In the 1st Epistle of Peter, chapter 2:5, it is written: "You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood"; to the Corinthians in chapter 3:16: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"; and in chapter 6:19: "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you?"; and in chapter 6:16 of 2 Corinthians: "For you are the temple of the living God"; in Acts 7:48: "However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands"; and in chapter 17:24: "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything."

6) We have an image in the temple, which is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; Colossians 1:15, the Apostle wrote: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son"; Romans 8:29: "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son"; and 1 Peter 2:21: "For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered