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A HISTORICAL OUTLINE OF SABBATH-KEEPERS IN RUSSIA FROM  
THE 15th CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Church history has been described first of all as Western Church history in most protestant (and Adventist) scholarly works. For these authors Russia has been a country of spiritual darkness, to which light was brought only from the West.

Many Orthodox writers shared the same point of view, but from a different perspective. For them only Orthodoxy has been "genuinely Russian". Protestantism, according to their claims, had no roots in Russia, was foreign to the Russian spirit, and was totally brought to Russia by western preachers. The latter, they thought, were primarily Germans; Sabbath-keeping was thought to have been brought by Jewish people.

Still today the major principles of many Protestant denominations of Western origin, including the SDA church, are considered by Russians as alien to the Russian people, who have an Orthodox mentality. These principles are viewed as being thrust upon them from outside without any roots in the history of Russian Orthodoxy or in the history of the Russian people with their culture, traditions and customs.

The Russian Orthodox church is especially proud of the absence of the Protestant Reformation in its history, as opposed to its presence in Roman-Catholic Church history. This fact is claimed to be the crownig evidence of the Orthodox teaching of its original apostolic purity.

However, the idea that social development in Russia was not accompanied by religious reformatory movements is refuted by the historical records. "Russian history didn't have a Reformation". A.I.Klibanov, the famous investigator of popular antireligious movements in Russia, wrote, "but it doesn't mean, that Russian social development didn't give rise to social-religious movements of a reformation type in different historical periods." /1/

It could not be different. The problem is that "Christianity in Russia was spread from above by the state authorities" /2/. Christianity with its moral teaching and rites was foreign to the original paganism of Eastern Slavs. Thus a long battle started between Christianity and paganism which ended in a so called "double-religion": A synthesis of Orthodoxy and

paganism. At the beginning of the 15th century, Cardinal De'Elie wrote to Rome, "Russians brought together their Christianity and paganism in such a way that it is difficult to distinguish what it is: Christianity with pagan traces or paganism with some features of Christian teachings." /3/.

That is why Russian Christian history was accompanied by some attempts to purify Biblical teachings from pagan delusions. These attempts turned to be Reformatory movements. In them one can see the beginnings of denominational statements which characterize SDA church teachings, in particular the Sabbath as the Lord's Day.

On the basis of historical information it is now possible to prove that the Sabbath issue is as old in Russia as the Russian unified state (i.e., from the time of Ivan III).

## II. SOME BACKGROUND OF THE HISTORICAL ISSUE AND EXPLANATION OF TERMINOLOGY

The official name for the Sabbatarians before the revolution was "Judaicals." Brockghauz and Efron Encyclopaedic Dictionary gives such a definition: "Judaicals - sects, seeking to identify Christianity with Judaism". /4/ The term "Judaizers" was often used in Orthodox missionary literature.

The three following groups of Sabbatarians were united under this name:

1. "Gers" (Hebrew word "ger" denotes "a newcomer," "a converted one"). This small sect rose from Christian Sabbatarians and Molokan at the beginning of the 19th century. "The most thoughtful and consistent sectarians, who were not satisfied with sabbatarianism, molokans and other variants of these rationalistic trends of people's intellect" /5/ joined this sict.

They completely renounced Christianity, studied Hebrew, prayed in Hebrew, accepted the Talmud, wanted to be like natural Jews in everything and shared the same belief that the expected Messiah should be an earthly king. Gers are true monotheists, they do not acknowledge any mediation between God and man.

2. "Sabbatarians." This group also kept Jewish holidays and ceremonies (including circumcision), but had their worship services in Russian, they accepted the New Testament, though they considered it lower than the Old Testament; they considered Jesus Christ a Prophet, but not the Incarnate Son of God.

The revering of icons, relics, crosses was considered by Christian Sabbatarians to be worshipping "idols". They tried to apply Old Testament prophets' accusations and Old Testament legal norms to the Russian social reality. This gave them material for accusation to the ruling church and serfdom.

3. "Christian Sabbatarians." We can conditionally name so several groups of Christians who accepted the Trinity and considered Jesus Christ the Incarnate Son of God. They did not practice circumcision. With the first two groups they share a literal understanding of the Decalogue (including the Sabbath commandment), as well as abstention from pork, fish without scales and crawfish. By these particular features they are remarkably similar to the Protestant denomination of Western origin -- Seventh-day Adventists.

Sabbatarians are referred to as "heretics" for the first time in the works of the "church father Epiphany (d. 403 AD). They could be found in Palestine until the fifth century. Also in the fourth & fifth centuries the Sabbath was kept by the "Gypsistaries", and in Africa -- by the "Heavenly Beings", against whom Emperor Gonorius issued two edicts. /6/

With the division of the official church into Roman-Catholicism and Greek-Orthodoxy, the situation in the West became different from that in the East. In the West throughout the Bible was inaccessible to the masses -- it was not translated into languages people spoke and the laity were forbidden to read it. In the East, however, the Orthodox Church was translating the Bible into different languages and recommending the reading of the Holy Scriptures. That is why there were Christian Sabbatarians in the Orthodox East (in Byzantium, Bulgaria and Russia). It is interesting to notice that members of the Novgorod-Moscow heresy of "Judaizers", which will be discussed later, translated some parts of the Bible into contemporary Russian language. /7/

In 1324 - 1336 AD in Byzantium in Soluni (formerly Thessalonica, or present day Saloniki) there was a sect of "Judaizers," who exalted the Ten Commandments and rejected the worshipping of relics and saints. One of the members of this sect, a Greek Hioni, was arrested. The sect moved to Bulgaria. Here in 1360, following the demand of Reverend Feodossi the Church council in the city of Tyrnovo decided to curse the "heretics" and put them in the hands of civil authorities. /8/ In the second half of the fifteenth century Sabbatarians appear also in Russia.

Before we turn to the history of Sabbath keeping in Russia, it is necessary to explain some terminology. Such terms as "Sabbatarians", "Judaicals", "Judaizers" should be disassociated from the negative connotation which were given to them by militant Orthodox clergy. These clergymen blame the members of these groups treason against Orthodoxy and tried to stir up religious-jingoistic conflicts around them. In view of the negative connotations which have over the centuries settled upon the word "Sabbatarians", we will use the more neutral term "Sabbath keepers" and, beginning with 18th century, "Subbotniks"- from the Russian word "Subbota", meaning Sabbath.

### III. BRIEF SUMMARY OF SABBATH -KEEPERS IN RUSSIA

To make the statement easier, we will use the division of Russian Orthodox history into periods accepted by the majority of historians and approved by the practical scientific and literature experience. /9/

#### 1. KIEV OR PREMONGOLIAN PERIOD (UP TO THE 13TH CENTURY AD).

We could find no information about Sabbath keepers in Russia prior to the Mongolian invasion.

#### 2. MOSCOW PERIOD ( FROM THE MONGOLIAN INVASION UNTIL THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PATRIARCHATE, 1596 AD).

The major representative of the Sabbath keepers in this period was the "Judaizers heresy" or "Novgorod-Moscow heresy".

Many scientific works have been written about this heresy, in which the evaluations of this trend were absolutely different -- from considering their teachings completely Jewish to announcing them rationalists, who had nothing to do with Judaism and did not renounce Christianity. In fact, various opinions were present -- from Judaicals, totally rejecting the divinity of Jesus Christ, to rationalists, rejecting even the resurrection of the dead, -- but there were also genuine Christian Sabbatarians.

Here is the brief history of the "Judaizers." In 1471 prince Michael Olelkovitch (Alexandrovitch), the last of the princes, came to Novgorod at their request to be the head of the principality. Zahari Skara (Skharia), a learned salesman and a Jew, came with him. His coming was an additional cause of intellectual fervor among the educated people of Novgorod. The most educated citizens of Novgorod -- priests Denis (Dionissi) and Alexi, then a Sofia arch priest Gabriel -- were the ideologists of the movement.

In 1478 Novgorod lost its independence and was annexed to Moscow (at the same time, Moscow grand prince Ivan III, grandfather of Ivan The Terrible, unified the fragmented Russian principalities into one Russian state with a capital in Moscow). In 1480, while Ivan III was in Novgorod, he came to like Dionissi and Alexi so much, that he took them to Moscow, and made one of them the arch priest of Archangel Cathedral and the other one the arch priest of Uspenski Cathedral. Dionissi and Alexi were dear guests in Moscow and their fresh ideas have had great success. Everyone wanted to hear their teachings, including arch priest Zossima, the learned scribe Feodor Kuritzin with his brother Ivan-Volk, and Yelena Voloshanka heir to the throne of Dmitri, as well as crowds of common people. Within ten years the sect had gripped Moscow, Novgorod, Pskov and all of the neighboring regions. Acc. to one church source: "So many people were tempted and drawn to Judaism, that they can hardly be numbered". /10/

By the end of the 1480-s Sabbath keepers enjoyed the protection of Ivan III. His daughter-in-law Yelena professed the views of the "heretics." Feodor Kuritzin, scribe of the Grand Prince had the greatest influence among the

"Judaizers." There was a certain circle around him: Semen Klenov wrote down his views and Ivan Tcherny "wrote books." The sectarians had an influence at the court, and in September 1490 they managed to elevate their fellow-believer Zossima to the Metropolitan's pulpit, but in 1495 Zossima was thrown out by the churchmen and sent to a monastery.

The Orthodox Church began an active struggle with the "Judaizers." In Novgorod this struggle was headed in 1487 by Archbishop Gennadi Gonozov, appointed by Ivan III. He was the first to point to physical extermination as a way to deal with heretics. Pointing to the example of the Spanish king who "cleansed the earth" by means of the Inquisition, Gennadi was urging the same thing. /11/ At his initiative, on September 17, 1490, a council gathered which condemned the sectarians. There were spiritual people among them — arch priest Gabriel, priests Dionissi (one of the initiators), Maxim and Vassili, deacons Makar and Samuel, monk Zakhar (Zakharia), civil people — Vassuk (priest Dionissi's son-in-law), and deacons Gridya and Samsonko. The accused (including Dionissi and Zakharia) were anathematized and brought to Gennady to be put into prison and to repent.. Gennadi ordered them to meet 40 miles away from the city. There they were put on horsebacks there, with their backs to the horses' heads, dressed with their clothing inside out and having their heads crowned with straw, hay and birch bark hats inscribed with the words "This is Satan's army" inscribed on their hats. They were carried this way around the city, and then the crowns were burnt on their heads. /12/

An extant extract from the late message of saint Joseph to the great king Basil say that "to kill a heretic either with one's hands or with a prayer is the same." The message provoked censure from the elders of many monasteries. They were convinced of the importance of clemency towards the deluded, and of the irrelevance of criminal measures in questions of faith. /13/

One more very important circumstance facilitated the rapid spread of the "heresy". According to the Orthodox system of chronology, the year 1492 was to have been the last year of earth's history. In accordance with the timing of the old passover (Easter), the night of March 24, 1492, marked the passage

Let us now consider the teachings of the "Judaizers." "Heretics, - according to the words of Joseph Volotzki - "teach Judaism through the Decalogue and Saduccaic and Messalianic heresy and doing many corruptions." They also " do not worship the human image of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, neither the image of the Most Clean, nor His saints; but cursing and blaming and saying that these are the works of men. They also eat and drink simple bread and Jesus' blood as simple wine during the worship services, and do other heresies contrary to the ordinances of the Holy Apostles and the Holy Fathers, keeping more to the Old Testament, celebrating the Jewish Passover, eat meat on Wednesday and on Friday and doing other heresies, which cannot be written down". /18/

Some sectarians rejected the divinity of Jesus Christ, and even the resurrection of the dead. But not all of them: they had anti-Aryan books, Bogomils and Jews; in issues like monasticism - they used the New Testament (e.g., 1 Tim. 4:1-3). "Judaizers" demolished traditional stereotypes of old Russian thinking to which the idea of critical analysis was foreign. Even the main representative of their opponents, Joseph Volotsky, indiscriminately draws arguments from different sources and puts side by side the Law of Moses and the apocryphal books. It was the Novgorod-Moscow heretics who introduced elements of enlightenment and critical analysis into Russian thinking. They wanted every person to be able to freely use knowledge and to not be afraid of different trends of thought. They stressed toleration of the things which the official Church hated so much. They themselves, were highly educated and erudite people. Sobolevsky wrote that "Judaizers were the people who were up to the education of their time". /19/

In spite of repressive measures that were undertaken by the State together with the official Church toward the "Judaizers", the influence of their views on Russian society continued to be quite considerable. We can see this in an action taken in 1551 during the time of Ivan IV (Terrible) by the Stoglavny Council of the Russian Orthodox Church. In chapter 95 it says "we enjoin all to celebrate Saturday equally with Sunday, according to the rule prescribed by the apostles Peter and Paul". /20/

Legal documents of 1649 and 1689 mention the existence, if not of an organized sect, then, at least of some separate facts. About 1640 in the Saratov region there existed two sects, close to each other: "Sabbatarians" and "Brothers of the Resurrection Day" (the only difference between them was the days they celebrated). After the measures, taken by Patriarch Nikon they moved to the Caucasus. /25/

#### 4. SYNODAL PERIOD (1700 - 1917)

The ruling Church becomes an appendage of the State. It is ruled by the "Sacred Governing Synod" headed by the procurator, who was chosen from among the secular people by the tsar. What do we know of Sabbath keepers of this period?

In the first half of the XVIII century a well-known expert in schism of the Russian Orthodox Church, saint Dimitri Rostovski in his "Investigation" mentions the "Sabbatarians, who celebrate the Sabbath in a Jewish way". /26/ These Sabbatarians ("Slitters") lived at the river Don. Other authors name Sabbatarians "Icon-fighters" and "Seleznevtzi", as the Sabbatarians near Tula were named after Seleznev. A more wide spread growth of the Sabbatarians refers to the reign of Ekatherina II. Appearance of Molokans and Subbotniks refers to the same time.

N. Astyrev writes: "It is being said that a Molokan teacher, Uklein, got acquainted with a sect of Judaicals in the Saratov region. One of their prominent figures was a man named Dolmatov; Uklein persuaded Dolmatov to accept the most important dogmas of the Molokan faith, and as a compromise, he made acceptance of some forms of Judaism obligatory for his followers: so, a union was established between Judaism and the Molokans. After Uklein's death there began strife among the Molokans about the Jewish ceremonies and dogmas: some of Uklein's disciples, headed by Sundukov, remained loyal to him and accepted the name "Subbotniks", while the others, who did not want to accept Jewish ordinances, were called "Molokans-Sunday-keepers". /27/

Sundukov was a peasant from the village of Dubrovka, in the Saratov region. Later Molokans-Subbotniks appeared also in Kuban, where they were called "Psaltirniks" by the local people, because they sang Psalms of David in the old Molokan way during their services.

At the same time Sabbath keepers in other places began to be known: in 1797 there was a Don Cossack Philip Kosyakov.

He preached the teaching of Subbotniks in Don. Together with his brother he appealed to the chief of Don's army with a petition asking to let them freely confess their belief. The result of their petition is not known. But there is information that many inhabitants of the city of Alexandroff, mainly among the merchant and lower middle classes avoided their public duties on Sabbath.

In 1804 Subbotniks were found in the Orlovski region and in 1805 - in Moscow. In 1811 Subbotniks were suddenly found in many regions. During the first half of the XIX century Subbotniks were found in following regions: Moscow, Tula, Orel, Ryazan, Tambov, Penza, Saratov, Astrakhan, Stavropol and Voronezh. Persecutions began. On June 23 1820 all Subbotniks were forced to move to the Caucasuses. It interesting to note that in the same year, the Committee of Ministers took regulations prohibiting Jews to have Christians as household servants. /29/ On February 3, 1825 there was issued a synodal edict on the basis of the regulations of the Committee of Ministers "About the Measures Against the Spreading of a Jewish Sect Named Subbotniks", ratified by His Majesty Emperor Alexander I. The text of the edict says:

"As nothing can have a greater influence on simple people, as scorn and mocking over the delusions, and that this means is used by schismatics from different sects; as well as by the Sabbatarians against the Orthodox faith, so the Sabbatarians should be named a Jewish sect by the local authorities, that they are indeed Jews, for their real name of Sabbatarians or keeping the law of Moses does not give an exact understanding to the people about the sect and does not create such a repugnance, which an assurance that they are being converted to Judaism can create". /30/

After the persecutions of 1825 to 1826 and other years, Subbotniks gradually began to disappear from the Central regions and appeared in outlying districts (Northern Caucasus, Zakavkazye, Siberia). But after the evacuation of Subbotniks, many "secret" Sabbath keepers remained to profess their faith. The details of the teachings and of the services were different from one region to another.

Besides the Molokans-Subbotniks, the Sabbath was kept by some Molokans-priguns in Zakavkazye, and also by Jehowists-Ilyinists. The founder of the Jegowa witnesses sect, was Nikolay Ilyin, a former captain of artillery. The sect appeared in the Urals, in the middle of the 19th century. Its adherents tried to return to the old Hebrew God Yahweh. At the same time they did not want to give up Christianity. The basis of their teaching was the law of love to their neighbors. All the members of the sect formed one brotherhood with community property. They were noted for their simplicity, modesty and industry. They kept the Sabbath and the Law regarding clean and unclean foods. As for circumcision, Ilyin considered it only for Jews. He thought it was sufficient to have "circumcision by faith on the heart". /31/

In 1890 Ilyinetz Grigori Plotnikov said: "People have called us Sabbatarians, because, originally, according to the commandment, we "remembered the Sabbath day", we did not work on this day, but now, remembering that Jesus had done good deeds on that day, we work on that day, but give what we earned to the poor..." /32/

A new epoch of great reforms in Russia began in 1855 when the emperor Alexander II ascended to the throne. The situation for Sabbath keeping people was improving. In many places they did not hide their faith. Subbotniks again appeared in Central Russia. During the 1870's in the Pavlov district of Voronezh Region 90 Sabbath keepers were handed a judgment by the court. In accordance with this judgment they were to have been deprived of their rights and exiled to the Caucuses. But the representative of the Senate Mordvinov who observed the process, gave a favorable testimonial about the Subbotniks. He wrote: "They lead an isolated domestic life. In their relation to authorities

they are irreproachable, they work diligently and pay taxes well". As a result the Subbotniks case was closed. /33/

According to the testimony of many authors, in the second half of the 19th century Subbotniks were present in 30 provinces of Russia, they numbered above 30 thousand followers. In April 17, 1905, the Conscience of Freedom Manifesto put an end to the severe measures that were taken against Judaizers and Sabbath keepers in some provinces. But still province authorities would often confuse those who kept the Sabbath with Jews.

It is interesting to note that when one of the first SDA Church missionaries, R. Conradi (1856-1939) started to preach in Russia (1886), the accusation was brought against him of spreading the Judaizers heresy and of converting Russian people to the Jewish religion. He spent 40 days in prison until representatives from the American Embassy explained to the Russian authorities that Conradi was not a Jew, but a Christian. /34/

In our time the so called "Free Subbotniks" - one of the branches of Sabbath-keeping Christians, declared themselves to originate from the Russian Subbotniks. Representatives of this stream lived in Kazakhstan, Siberia and in Western Ukraine. Ivan Kalinovitch Nozdrev was one active figure. "Free Subbotniks" published a brochure severely criticizing the prophetic scheme of Seventh-day Adventists under the title "Broken Reservoirs of 1844".

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Both private and official scholars unanimously pointed out that the Sabbath keepers are hard-working, knowledgeable, obedient to the authorities' demands, and that there is no drinking, dissipation and poverty among them; they are friendly, hospitable and eagerly provide help both to their fellow-believers and to Orthodox people. These unanimous testimonies of the pre-Revolutionary authors show, that the main thing about Russian Sabbath keepers is witnessing about God not mainly by words, but their life example. Without any united organization, common doctrine or even a common order of service, Russian Sabbath keepers were witnessing about the Law of God by their own example during four centuries.

Thus, when at the end of the 19th century the SDA Church teaching began to spread across Russia, many of their doctrines did not seem strange or alien to the Russian people. As for the Sabbath, the minds of the Russian people were prepared for its acceptance by religious reformatory movements mentioned above.

At the present time, in the Tambov and Voronezh regions and in some regions of Azerbaijan and Armenia there remain separate groups of Subbotniks who are not connected with the SDA Church.

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