The long read

A century in the Siberian wilderness: the Old Believers who time forgot

In 1978, Soviet scientists stumbled upon a family living in a remote part of Russia. They hadn't interacted with outsiders for

decades. Almost half a century later, one of them is still there

By Sophie Pinkham

Agafia Lykova near her remote home in Siberia in 2014. Photograph: Photo ITAR-TASS/ITAR-TASS Photo/Corbis

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In the summer of 1978, a team of geologists exploring southern Siberia found something rarer than diamonds. While searching for a helicopter landing site amid the steep hills and forested canyons of the western Sayan mountains, their pilot caught sight of what appeared to be a garden, 150 miles from the nearest settlement. Hovering as low as he could, he saw a house. No people were visible, but someone was clearly tending the garden. He and his geologist passengers were shocked to find a dwelling in an area long considered too remote for human habitation.

When the four geologists set up camp 10 miles away, it was the mysterious homestead that was first in their mind. Who could live here? Were the inhabitants the last Mohicans of the Brezhnev era? The geologists ventured to the settlement bearing gifts - and a pistol, just in case. They were greeted by a disheveled old man dressed in patched-up sacking cloth. This was Karp Osipovich Lykov, the patriarch of the family. Inside a tiny, dark cabin, the geologists found Karp's two adult daughters, Natalia and Agafia, weeping and praying. Four miles away, by the riverside, lived Karp's two middle-aged sons, Savin and Dmitry. It soon became apparent that none of the members of this ageing family had interacted with outsiders in decades.

None of the Lykov children had ever seen bread. But when the geologists offered them a loaf and some jam, they refused. "We are not allowed that," they said, in a refrain that would become familiar to all their visitors. Natalia and Agafia were hard to understand, not only because of their archaic vocabulary but also because of an odd, chanting cadence that one geologist described as "a slow, blurred cooing".

The Lykovs were Old Believers, members of the Orthodox Christian schismatic sect whose history is deeply bound up with that of the forest and the countryside. The Old Believers emerged in the mid-17th century after Patriarch Nikon, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, amended the liturgy to bring it into harmony with the Greek Orthodox version. The reforms altered the spelling of "Jesus" - at a time when letters were understood as something close to the literal flesh of God - and changed the number of fingers to be raised when making the sign of the cross from two to three.

Those who rejected these innovations became known as Old Believers. To the rebels, who soon broke into many different branches, Nikon's reforms were a betrayal of the true Christianity. Their anger fed on broader social

injustices of the era and was further stoked by the notorious lack of respect for Russian Orthodoxy shown by Peter the Great. A self-consciously westernising tsar, Peter preferred the gods Bacchus and Mars.

In the early days of the schism, Old Believers were burned alive, tortured and imprisoned for their faith. Many were cast into pits in the ground. They believed that they bore a tremendous burden - the preservation of the true words of God - and their extreme ways of living reflected this sense of responsibility. As the whole world fell into sin, they maintained their purity. While they awaited the end of the world, they maintained strict rules about diet (for the Lykovs, no bread or jam), clothing, everyday practices and the adoption of new technology. Some Old Believers and other religious dissidents resorted to self-immolation. Whole communities locked themselves in their village churches and set them aflame.

Others took refuge in the forest, the safest place to hide from the authorities and preserve their way of life without risk of contamination by the outside world. Many branches of Old Believers were “priestless”, meaning that a family could worship without the help of a professional man of God. For the most radical Old Believers, holiness was directly correlated to isolation. The highest holiness was the life of the hermit. In the Bible hermits retreated to the desert; in Russia they retreated to the forest. But they called the forest a desert, deriving the names for hermits and for monasteries from the same word. The forest was the wasteland of holiness, the emptiness of God.

The enlightened Catherine the Great changed course, allowing the Old Believers to practise their faith openly. This led to a split between the Old Believers who wanted to remain “priestless” and those who decided to re-enter society. Those who continued to reject the authority of church and state told stories of a legendary place east of Russia - in Siberia, or perhaps in China - where the old ways had been preserved and the antichrist could never enter: an Old Believer Shangri-La. Some travelled to China in search of it.

The 19th century saw renewed efforts to force the sectarians into conformity. But a nostalgic fascination also arose around the Old Believers’ capacity to preserve a lost past, most often in the forest. Wildly popular, acclaimed and influential in its time, Pavel Melnikov-Pechersky’s novel In the Forests was a literary monument to the Old Believers of the 19th century. It was stuffed with ethnographic detail and affectionate catalogues of local flora and fauna - for instance, plants with the poetic colloquial names “star- melting” or “white-moustache”.

There was a bitter irony in the fact that Melnikov-Pechersky became the most famous fictional chronicler of the Old Believers. He was not only a writer, but also a bureaucrat responsible for investigating Old Believer

sectarianism in Nizhny Novgorod, on the Volga River. Melnikov-Pechersky was studying the Old Believers with the goal of converting them. At first, the community loathed him for inspections and raids that broke up their chapels and monasteries and resulted in arrests and forced conversions to orthodoxy. He entered their folklore as someone who made a deal with the devil in exchange for the power to see through walls. But in the late 1850s he dramatically changed his position, eventually advocating for an end to their persecution.

In Melnikov-Pechersky's fiction and in other, similar works of the period, the forest functioned as a timeless space of holy safety for Old Believers and monks in search of God. Though early Orthodox missionaries cut down the sacred trees worshipped by pagans, the trees grew back and granted their protection to persecuted Christian believers. In one scene in In the Forests, Melnikov-Pechersky describes how 17th-century monks from the besieged Solovki monastery on the Arctic Circle were guided by a floating icon into the forest. Here the taiga - as the coniferous forests of Siberia are known - was the Russian analogue to the Promised Land of the Old Testament. Melnikov-Pechersky also linked the Old Believers to the Russian myth of the city of Kitezh, a tale about faithful Russians who summoned the divine drowning of their city to save it from Mongol invasion. Kitezh was preserved in Lake Svetloyar, the paradoxically named "Light Ravine", abyss of happiness and resurrection, awaiting the arrival of the next world. In a similar fashion, Old Believers would wait in the forest for the end of the world and the arrival of the kingdom of heaven.

In 1905, Tsar Nicholas II signed a law ending all religious persecution of minorities. This was a short-lived interval of total freedom for Old Believer communities, many of which retreated even further into the remote forests when the Bolsheviks took control and imposed state atheism.

Until the 1920s, Karp's family had lived peacefully in their Old Believer village in the remote Altai region. This mountainous and forested area of southern Siberia, close to the borders with China and Mongolia, was beloved by those who hoped to avoid the authorities. The Lykovs relied on their gardens, crops and cows, and on hunting and fishing. To avoid contact with sinful civilisation, they traded via middlemen who sold their pelts and fish and brought back salt and iron in return. But the natural conditions at the settlement were not ideal - it was too wet and foggy - and there were rumours that the new government was making a list of Old Believers.

The Lykovs and four other families moved farther upriver, to an even wilder area. But this newest settlement was short-lived. In 1932, the Altai Zapovednik, or nature reserve, was created; its area included the new settlement. This made hunting and fishing there illegal. Old Believers were offered jobs on the reserve; if they refused, they were instructed to leave. For

years the authorities turned a blind eye to those who refused to comply, but by 1934 the pressure was too great. The Lykovs packed up again.

Flight into the wilderness was the safest refuge from the increasingly violent authorities, who were liable to shoot Old Believers at the first provocation, made plans to wipe out their remote communities, and came looking for their children, hoping to save them from a life lived in taiga isolation. During the second world war, the authorities combed the forest for deserters. But they never found the Lykov family. The deeper in the forest the Old Believers lived, the more holy they could become.

Until the arrival of the geologists in 1978 - 44 years after they left civilisation behind - the Lykovs were sighted only once, by a group of tourists floating down the river in 1958. As the tourists passed, they saw Karp fishing, his emaciated wife sitting beside him. They apparently did not call out for help, though Agafia recalled that the family had been surviving on "rowanberry leaf, roots, grass, mushrooms, potato tops and bark ... Every year we held a council to decide whether to eat everything up or leave some for seed." A late, hard frost in 1961 had caused a family famine. The Lykovs survived on straw, their leather shoes and ski lining, bark and birch buds. The matriarch, Akulina, died of hunger. The family had eaten all their rye seeds in their desperation. When a single spike grew the next season, they thanked God for a miracle.

When the Lykovs were discovered by the geologists, they were still furious with Patriarch Nikon and Peter the Great. Karp Osipovich called Peter "the antichrist in human form". Even the recent world wars, known only vaguely to the Lykovs, were the responsibility of the vile Peter. When the geologists explained the story of the second world war to Karp, he shook his head dolefully and said, "What is this, a second time, and always the Germans. A curse on Peter. He flirted with them."

They had outdone themselves in their rejection of Peter's turn to the west. Agafia, the youngest Lykov, had never seen a wheel. The family made fire with a tinderbox. Their only light was the sun or a torch, and they wore birchbark shoes and lived without salt. The family had begun their time in the forest with carrots, but one year all the seeds were eaten by mice. (The carrot seeds provided by the geologists helped remedy their ghastly white skin, the result of carotene deficiency.) The family subsisted on dried potatoes and pine nuts, stored in birchbark containers, as well as turnips, onions, peas and rye. Karp Osipovich thanked God for hemp, potatoes and pine nuts every day. He had overcome the Old Believers' original hatred of potatoes, which had been introduced by Peter the Great and were

denounced as “a diabolical, abundant, lecherous plant”. The Lykovs were proud of their ability to read their smoke-stained Bible, though it was so thoroughly blackened that the words were no longer visible. Akulina had taught her children to read and write in Old Church Slavonic, using a stick dipped in honeysuckle juice to draw blue letters on birch bark.

Over time, the taiga had become an increasingly important source of calories, as the Lykovs reverted from a primarily agricultural life to one closer to that of Neolithic hunter-gatherers. They drank birch juice and ate wild nettles, wild onions, mushrooms, berries and fish.

Only when they were very lucky did they manage to catch an animal in their primitive pit traps. In late August, the whole family climbed Siberian pines, harvesting nuts.

Winter in the Altai mountains, Ust-Koksenskiy region, Russia. Photograph: oxygen/Getty Images

Dmitry Lykov was the family’s master tracker. He knew all the animal trails and he understood where to dig a snare pit; he was the one who got the first meat for the family, which also meant the first new leather and fur. He tracked Siberian deer and killed them with a pike. He could walk through the snow barefoot and sleep in the forest even in winter, dressed in clothes made from a burlap sack. He brought the others updates about the animals in the taiga, their only substitute for news of the outside world: the grouse whose

babies had hatched, the squirrels huddled together against the cold. He made friends with a bear who took up residence nearby.

But when Dmitry came down with pneumonia, his family refused medical help even when it was offered. They were not allowed that. In autumn 1981, Dmitry, Savin and Natalia all died. Dmitry died of pneumonia. Savin and Natalia's causes of death are obscure; they may have fallen sick because of unfamiliar illnesses introduced by the geologists' visits. Now it was only Karp Osipovich and Agafia.

Karp had hoped to find a husband or another companion to live with Agafia. She spent a happy few weeks with her mother's sisters, who invited her to live permanently with them in their village, but she returned to her father in the taiga and remained there even after his death. One distant cousin came and lived with her for a while, and they were married - marriage among priestless Old Believers being an enterprise undertaken purely according to the will of the spouses. But they quarreled about whether to kill a friendly wolf who had befriended Agafia's dog. Agafia felt the wolf was no threat, but her husband disagreed. Soon he returned to town.

On a trip to visit Old Believer nuns hundreds of miles away, she stopped in Abakan, a town with apartment buildings. She was dismayed to learn that cooking on a fire in the courtyard was not allowed, and that she had to use the gas fire indoors: a violation of her principles.

The man who made the Lykovs famous was a journalist named Vasily Peskov. After his first article about the Lykovs, published in 1982, he was inundated by letters asking for more news about Karp and Agafia, or sending him gifts and money that he was to bring them on his next visit. By the time his wonderfully detailed, tender book about them was published in 1992, he had been visiting them once or twice a year for a decade.

Agafia, centre, and neighbour Yerofei Sedov, right, with another member of the family. Photograph: Komsomolskaya Pravda

The Lykovs held an endless fascination for the Russian public. They were human buried treasure, a time capsule, Russian Rip van Winkles, living exemplars of a Russia that had disappeared long ago. The Lykovs had bypassed Stalin's purges and had hardly noticed the second world war. At the same time, their experience of starvation resonated with some of the most painful episodes in Soviet history. Millions of peasants had starved to death during Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture. During the wartime siege of Leningrad, a whole city had been reduced to boiling shoe leather to survive. Less dramatic forms of deprivation were familiar to almost all readers of Soviet newspapers. The Soviet government had never been good at providing a steady supply of high-quality food, and in the second half of the 1980s ration cards were reintroduced.

Both stunningly exotic and remarkably relatable, the taiga family promised the possibility of living entirely outside corrupt, violent, uncertain modernity, at least for a while, and of preserving an ancient form of Russian tradition. Their story marched in step with Russia's sense of national martyrdom, which stretched back for centuries, and with the idea that the more isolated Russia became, the greater its importance in world culture. The perfect emblem of endurance, faith, and self-sufficiency, the Old Believers were like an ark, preserving the essence of Russian culture through a great flood of catastrophe and modernisation.

As Agafia and her father grew older, it became impossible for them to live without help. The Lykovs grew bolder in their requests of assistance from Peskov, the geologists, and by extension their many admirers throughout Russia. They relaxed their old rules, dressing in the clothes they were given (though only if they were brand new, used clothes being against the rules because of Old Believers' fear of contamination). They traded candles for flashlights, cleaned the floor and their faces, and installed a hand-crank meat-grinder. They began using enamelled pots painted with brightly coloured berries.

By the 1990s, the Lykovs were like a museum exhibit, or like former dancing bears moved to a wildlife enclosure. The illusion of wildness was sustained by constant interventions from the outside world. Agafia's friends gave her an SOS button that she could use to summon a helicopter if she became ill, but she began to abuse the privilege. Someone had to explain to her how much it cost to send a helicopter into the taiga. It was the 1990s, the Russian economy was in tatters, and there was no money left to pay her bills.

As the Lykovs grew more domesticated, much of Russia was being driven back to the land by social and economic turmoil. Gorbachev's perestroika in the second half of the 1980s had been well-intentioned but poorly conceived. Criminals and entrepreneurs (there was often little distinction between the two) had exploited the glaring flaws in the government's economic policies to enrich themselves by gutting state-run enterprises. Acknowledging the failures of the government to provide food for the population, Gorbachev expanded a program that made land available for "allotment gardens", so that anyone who wished could grow their own food.

An Old Believers church in the abandoned town of Pustozyorsk, Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Russia. Photograph: Dmitri Korobtsov/Getty Images

By the time Yeltsin became president of Russia in 1991, a new class of immensely wealthy, ruthless entrepreneurs was emerging. Yeltsin's policies would accelerate the rise of the men who came to be known as oligarchs. When he lifted price controls, rocketing prices left Russians unable to afford basic goods. Every Russian received vouchers that represented their share in the state-run enterprises that were about to be privatised. But most Russians were so desperate for cash or so unaware of the potential value of the vouchers that they sold theirs for a pittance. Most vouchers ended up in the hands of the enterprises themselves. A visitor to a community of Old Believers in the 1990s remarked admiringly that not one of them had received a voucher - they had refused to accept any. After all, they still lived without electricity. Independent of the state, they were invulnerable to its collapse. Here was another aspect of the Lykovs' appeal.

By 1995, the Russian government was out of money and Yeltsin needed funds for his re-election campaign. Through the "loans-for-shares" scheme, he essentially sold off Russia's largest enterprises, including its oil and gas concerns. This cemented the position of the oligarchs, whose payments to Yeltsin bought them both Russia's greatest economic assets and the support of its president. Russia was being sold for parts, the needs of ordinary people forgotten. After the 1998 economic crisis, life expectancy fell to just 58.9

years for men, an unprecedented decline for a country that was not at war. The change was due to a large increase in deaths attributable to social stress: heart attacks, strokes, suicides, homicides, overdoses, car crashes.

When asked how they survived during this period, people often answered with one word: potatoes. Bags of potatoes were passed between relatives, friends and neighbours. Not even the skins were wasted. People slept at their fields near harvest time, guarding against potato thieves. In 2004, an elderly man in Novgorod oblast expressed Russia's collective affection when he erected a monument to the potato. The inscription thanked Christopher Columbus and Peter the Great for bringing it to Russia. The world of the Lykovs, who thanked God for potatoes every day, felt surprisingly contemporary.

During a television interview recorded for her birthday, in 2013, Agafia Lykova's speech still had a lisping rasp, a cheerful lopsidedness. By this point it may have been lost teeth that were to blame rather than isolation. She has a generous mouth and a forceful, prominent nose; there is an inquisitive, childlike glint in her eyes. Despite her life of hardship and isolation, she looked no older in the interview than most 70-year-old women, and happier than many. She still travelled on skis to collect water from a deep hole in the ice on the lake, where tall, slender conifers stood sentinel on the precipitous slopes that surrounded her homestead.

But with every year that passed, it was harder for her to live as she once had. With the help of the park ranger who is now responsible for her welfare, Agafia asked Oleg Deripaska, one of Russia's highest-profile oligarchs, for a new home. Deripaska first grew rich in the 1990s by buying stakes in a newly privatised aluminium plant in the same region as Agafia's settlement; he went on to expand the holding into the world's largest aluminium company, Rusal.

In 2021, Agafia moved into a new cabin built with Deripaska's support. She invited Putin for a visit, though he did not take her up on the offer. She had never received a voucher, but she benefited more than many Russians did from privatisation. In 2023, the regional news aired a video of her in her log cabin, receiving the more modest birthday gift of a grey woollen shawl from the park ranger. It was again wartime for Russia, but Agafia seemed unaware of that fact.

In 2025, there was a severe winter storm on Christmas Eve. Agafia was unharmed, but her holiday visitors were unable to fly in as planned. This did not mean she spent the holidays alone; she is now assisted by an Old Believer novice who arrived from Moscow, achieving a spiritual "feat", a

saintly act of self-sacrifice, through her service. Unlike the hermits of old, Agafia and the novice now have a telephone to facilitate communication with the press and rescue services. One former regional governor complained recently that Agafia's upkeep, notably the delivery of groceries by helicopter, was costing the state millions of rubles, and that it was illegal to live in a national park. But Agafia's status as a national treasure, the last member of an endangered species, outweighs such concerns.

On YouTube, Agafia, the woman who spent much of her life without bread or wheels, is a paradoxical superstar. Videos about her garner millions of views. There is even an unconvincing AI-generated account in her name that pretends to be her own video diary. Her popularity testifies to the allure of self-sufficiency in the wilderness – even as the last chapters of her story show that long-term survival alone in the taiga is only a fantasy.

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This article was amended on 22 January 2026. The man on the right in the black and white photo is Yerofei Sedov, not Karp Lykov as stated in an earlier caption.

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