

Book Reviews

Nadia Stangé-Zhirovova. *Une autre Russie. Fêtes et rites traditionnelles du peuple russe*, Paris: Peeters. 1998. xxii + 265 pp. 15 illustrations. Bibliography. Index.

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Une autre Russie is, as the title suggests, an account of that aspect of Russia which lies hidden from the view of most non-Russian observers, the traditional world of the Russian peasant. As such, the book is similar to Linda Ivanits' Russian Folk Belief in not being targeted primarily at folklorists. The content of the two books, however, does not as a whole coincide; Nadia Stangé-Zhirovova focuses mainly on calendar rituals, though she similarly aims to interpret and elucidate as well as merely describe. She thus rightly places emphasis on an explanation of the integral and crucial role played by traditional festivals in the peasant world.

The book opens with a historical survey that notes the gap between élite and people after the conversion of the former in 988, emphasizes the unity of Russians' world view in the Muscovite period when rural dwellers had finally accepted Christianity, before outlining the renewed but deeper gulf between élite and people in the post-Petrine period. Chapter III illustrates this more recent cultural gap through an examination of nineteenth-century Russian writers' views of the narod, as well as literary reflections of the social dichotomy. In between comes a discussion of the specific features of Russian popular belief, which also clarifies the author's approach to her subject. As she makes clear in the introduction, she is a product of the Nikita Tolstoi school of ethnolinguistics and wrote her thesis under the supervision of Boris Uspenskii. No surprise then to find an emphasis on the archaic nature of much of Russian folk belief, on paired opposites and dvoeverie. Although she notes that syncretism is a feature of popular Christianity everywhere, she still uses the Russian term with its implications of Russian uniqueness and has not followed recent historical debate (notably by Eve Levin) about the term and its usefulness or accuracy.

Discussion of calendar rituals is preceded by a general discussion of the compulsory nature of folk festivals and of Bakhtinian-style patterns of reverse behavior, the importance of interdictions on certain actions or behavior at given times as well as a discussion of the peasant's cyclical view of time and the role of festivals in guaranteeing the future prosperity of the community. The chapter includes an interesting discussion, based on the French scholar René Girard's work on African customs (La violence et le sacré, Paris. 1972) of feast and anti-feast. This chapter is succeeded by detailed discussion of the actual festivals, pride of place being given to Yuletide (Sviatki) and to pre-Lenten festivities (Maslenitsa). These are clearly presented and well-documented, using varied material from different periods and areas. Following the general principle in the book she also examines the treatment of each festival in Russian literature. The last section of the book offers a much more detailed examination of the popular image of saints than Linda

Ivanits had space for in her Russian Folk Belief (Armonk, NY, 1989), especially of Sts George and Nicholas. Brief sections are also devoted to the prophet Elijah, Sts Michael, Demetrius and Theodore. These sections are also well-documented, though would have been strengthened by a closer look at the vītae and Byzantine cults of these saints. The interpretation of the cult of Sts Nicholas and George is based upon Uspenskii's Filologicheskiia razyskaniia v oblasti slavianskikh drevnostei (Moscow, 1982) and Ivanov and Toporov's work on myth (Issledovaniia v oblasti slavianskikh drevnostei. Moscow, 1974), whose hypotheses are presented as proven. Unfortunately, the author is not familiar with Gail Lenhoff's important critique of Uspenskii's argument. The book concludes with a brief survey of folk culture after the Revolution and in the post-Soviet period.

At one point Nadia Stangé-Zhirovova deviates from her interpretative dependence on Propp (Agrarnye prazdniki), Uspenskii, Nikita Tolstoi and others, whose work, however interesting, cannot always be regarded as more than fascinating hypothesis. At the end of the chapter on Shrovetide Carnival (pp. 125-6) she summarizes views on the destruction of the Maslenitsa doll, which Sokolova interprets as symbolizing the end of winter, but others as a representation of death, with the doll replacing an earlier human sacrifice. Basing herself on Girard's views, but in fact adopting an approach familiar to social historians and anthropologists, she sees the destruction of the doll as a way of channeling the violent impulses inherent in peasant society and so assisting the general psychological health of the community. Perhaps because she links this with the idea of an earlier human sacrifice she does not pursue this line elsewhere, though in places this interpretive line could have been rewarding.

Overall, there is much that is valuable in this book, including some interesting analyses of individual folk songs and rituals, as well as sound judgments about the role of festivals in the traditional calendar. She convincingly demonstrates the importance of rituals of fertility and of death and rebirth in the calendar cycle. Although US colleagues may not have Francophone students, British and Canadian teachers of courses on Russian folklore, who do encounter them, will find this volume a useful addition to their reading lists.

Nadia Stangé-Zhirovova has read widely in Russian and in French (the virtual absence of recent Russian publications in the bibliography may perhaps be explained by publishing delays). What initially seemed shocking to at least this anglophone Slavist was the almost total absence of references to work published in English: four in all, of which only one, Frank Miller's Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era (Armonk, NY, 1990) is on Russian folklore. There are also just two references to German sources. This lacuna helps to explain the uncritical acceptance of the views of Russian scholars, however distinguished, as well as the absence of any reference to work on gender roles in folklore. Upon reflection, the situation seems less shocking than sad, because although I was aware of a few of Nadia Stangé-Zhirovova's articles, the bibliography threw up a number of works in French on Russian folklore which I did not know. Assuming (hopefully without arrogance) that my ignorance is not entirely atypical,

this suggests a lamentable lack of academic contact. It is regrettable that works like L. Gruel-Apert, La tradition oral russe (Paris: P.U.F. 1995) and F. Conte, L'héritage païen de la Russie. Le paysan et son univers symbolique (Paris: Albin Michel. 1997) are so little known among the English-speaking Slavists interested in folklore. Perhaps SEEFA can persuade French-speaking folklore scholars not only to join the organization, but also to send their books for review. We may then, perhaps, hope for a reverse initiative which would break the virtual hermetic seal between the two academic communities.

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