

Worobec, Christine D. *Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003. Notes. Bibliography. Index. xv+288. Paper. ISBN 0-87580-598-1. \$38.00 (cloth) \$23.00 (paper).

Several years after its appearance in 2001, Worobec's monograph still remains a solid multidisciplinary study on a problem that Russian authorities, both Church and secular, have struggled with for centuries. *Klikushi*, or shriekers, were mostly women who believed they were victims of black magic, possessed by evil beings who made them convulse, shriek in non-human voices, and do other abnormal things in the presence of holy objects. *Klikushestvo* was a widespread phenomenon and at times mass epidemics occurred. The author study is wide-ranging. She looks at the perception of the phenomenon of *klikushestvo* among various strata of Russian society, as well as the culture of *klikushestvo* itself over the span of several centuries, from the 16-17th centuries when it became commonplace till the 1930s when it was repressed – but not rooted out – by Soviet policies. Worobec builds her arguments on 260 individual cases of *klikushi* and 80 published cases of witchcraft in the countryside. These are drawn from religious, psychiatric, legal, and ethnographic sources. A captivating picture emerges of the Russian peasantry, the Orthodox Church, and civil authorities and the interrelations between all three.

Chapter One, *State and Church Perspectives*, describes how the Church and the state joined forces against all forms of superstitions for the sake of the State's advancement. In the 18th century this impacted *klikushestvo* in the form of imperial decrees and Senate decisions. *Klikushestvo* was, on the one hand, persecuted by civil authorities as a crime while, on the other, the Church defended it as a true spiritual illness, as real as miraculous healings. Although secular commissions helped to investigate both miraculous healings and epidemics of possession, the Church could not accept their materialistic view of the impossibility of such phenomena and emphasized the devil's dangerous role in a secular society. While initially men as well as women were known to become *klikushi*, demon possession was gradually feminized and sexualized.

Chapter Two, *Peasant Views*, presents how the mostly uneducated peasant masses in the empire subscribed to the idea of *klikushi* and believed in hexing by witches and in the contagious nature of possession. The author portrays the liminal status of those who were possessed and

explains why *klikushi* were almost not known in the Ukrainian setting. The author also investigates the close relationship between *klikushestvo* and witchcraft beliefs and practices, arguing that a possessed was the “counterimage to the rural witch and sorcerer” (p. 66). In this chapter the reader also learns how *klikushi* tried to rid themselves of possession by traveling to holy places and by submitting to exorcism rituals.

Chapter Three, *Literary and Ethnographic Portrayals*, is an analysis of how intellectuals perceived *klikushestvo* and witchcraft beliefs. Russian writers and composers like Dostoevsky, Gogol, Leskov, Tolstoy, and Mussorgskii and ethnographers like Pryzhov, and many others formed the public attitude towards the phenomenon through their artistic and scholarly works. Despite holding varying attitudes towards Orthodoxy and institutionalized religion, these men were very sympathetic to the possessed and blamed serfdom and the patriarchal brutality of the village for its existence. The romanticized images they produced elevated peasant women in the eyes of educated society and presented *klikushi* as a metaphor of sorts for suffering Mother Russia.

Chapter Four, *Psychiatric Diagnosis*, provides a complicated picture of how Russian psychiatrists, from the middle of the 19th century onwards, tried to solve the problem of *klikushestvo*. Armed with positivism and medical knowledge, they viewed *klikushestvo* as a symbol of Russian backwardness and they vigorously sought to civilize the peasantry. Their goal was to first explain etiology of the phenomenon and then to root it out. Linking *klikushestvo* first to mental illness, then to somnambulism, hysteria, and sexual pathology, Russian psychiatrists like Bekhterev, Iakobii, Krainskii, Suponev and others supported or rejected various medical theories. While their medical opinions differed, they invariably contested the Church’s claim to *klikushestvo* as its privileged field of expertise.

Chapter Five, *Sorting Through Multiple Realities*, is a conclusion showing how the history of views on the phenomenon of *klikushestvo* finally led to seeing it as a sociocultural drama with its own actors and audience. Each party in this drama gained something from its enactment and thus contributed to its persistence. The author explains why certain contemporary diagnoses would not fit the phenomenon, which existed in a specific cultural and religious context, and which remains an enigma for the rational mind.

In her book, Worobec beautifully describes the history of *klikushestvo* viewing it as a battlefield where different agents – the Church, state courts, and medical specialists – sought to gain power over

(chiefly) peasant female bodies and minds and to make them 'normal' and obedient. The author's feministic approach is understandable but misogyny seems to be a too strong contemporary notion applied to the context where Church itself preached subordinate position of women and where any deviant person would be feared and punished by both men and women. Despite the fascinating analysis and wealth of data in the *Possessed*, the reader unfortunately does not hear the subaltern voices of the *klikushi* themselves: the author mostly makes assumptions and conclusions on their behalf.

Worobec points out that *klikushestvo* was a Russian phenomenon unknown in Ukraine. She suggests though that it was not absent in Ukraine. Rather, nationalistically oriented Ukrainian ethnographers kept silent about such cases in an attempt to perpetuate a myth of spiritual health of the Ukrainians, contrasting it to Russian ill health (p. 68). She then draws her examples of witchcraft beliefs and practices from rich Ukrainian ethnographic sources. My own research on Ukrainian beliefs about death and the afterlife shows that ethnographers did not whitewash their data. Ukrainian ethnographic sources contain numerous case studies of adultery, homicide, infanticide, and incest. While clearly separating Ukrainian and Russian contexts, the author, however, provides Russian transliteration of Ukrainian personal and place names: Khar'kov (p.89), Vladimir Hnatiuk (p. 93); Kievan churches (p. 131).

Finally, the author mentions that *klikushestvo* is by no means a phenomenon of the past: it still exists in today's Russia. That being the case, it is not clear then why the author stops at the 1930s. Yet maybe linking the past to the present of this captivating phenomenon is just a matter of time...

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