

The Dangers of the Known World: Russian Popular Culture from 1800

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Introductory Comments

In recent years, it has become customary — particularly among younger historians — to see the transformation of Soviet society, above all during the Stalin era, in an analytical framework that emphasises the comparability of the changes wrought in the former Russian Empire to those occurring as a result of the self-consciously modernising ambitions espoused by other European, and more broadly Western, regimes (France, Britain, Germany, Italy, and the USA) at the same period. Following Elias and Foucault, commentators emphasise the constitutive, as well as the repressive, force of Soviet government, and its management of a ‘civilising process’ that had profound effects on mentality, as well as on economic structures and on material culture.¹ At the same time, a sense that the Soviet ‘civilising process’ had different effects to the ‘civilising process’ in other modern European states has led to an increased interest in what Soviet ideologues themselves would have described as ‘survivals of the past’

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¹ See e.g. [Hoffman, Kotsonis 2000]. An instructive exercise in comparative European history from the point of view of crusading modernism is [Mazower 1998].

(*perezhitki proshlogo*) — the legacy of existing beliefs, perceptions and attitudes in the beliefs, perceptions and attitudes under Soviet power. The influence of the historiography of other cultures, in particular China, has made popular the view of the Soviet Union as a ‘neo-traditional’ society — one where traditional beliefs and practices were not so much suppressed or driven underground as actively reinforced (albeit in transmuted form), a process that came about both passively (as a result of cultural inertia) and actively (as Soviet ideologists appealed to existing notions of justice, equality, collective and national identities, and propriety, as a strategy of legitimation) (see e.g. [Hoffman 2000; Kotkin 1994; Volkov 2000; Kozlova 1998]).¹

But in the Anglo-American world at any rate, this historiographical shift has taken place with remarkably little attention to the possible ‘traditions’ that were reshaped and revitalised in the ‘neo-traditional’ society. Often, analysis appears to operate by means of subtraction: beliefs and practices that are anomalous in terms of the general model of development in ‘modern’, ‘Westernised’ societies are silently assumed to be manifestations of ‘tradition’. If a lineage is traced for features of the Soviet mentality in the pre-revolutionary world, the material studied almost always comes from intellectual culture — the canons of radical political philosophy, or conversely, of religious thought.² Accounts of the heritage of ‘tradition’ in the sense of non-elite culture tend to adopt a large-scale, abstract approach, which allows almost no consideration of points of detail.³ Historical studies that consider the precise content of beliefs outside the educated population — that take into consideration material that might be classed as ‘folklore’ or ‘popular belief’ depending on terminological preferences — are rare. Where such material does come within the purview of historians, this generally happens without reference to the analytical categories, such as genre, with which folklorists are accustomed to working.⁴

Some explanation for this might be found in historians’ suspicion of the ‘ahistorical’ nature of folklore studies. As Stephen Lovell puts it in his comments below, *‘History, it seems to me, is often the Achilles’ heel of folklorists and ethnographers’*, since these are *‘in the business of studying a culture that is profoundly “traditional” and hence resistant*

¹ To date, ‘neo-traditional’ interpretations have tended to emphasise cultural inertia: see e.g. [Fitzpatrick 1993] on the persistence of ‘social estate’ [*sosloviya*] principles in Soviet Russia, or [Martin 2000].

² See e.g. [Boym 1994]; [Steinberg 2002].

³ See e.g. [Vishnevsky 1998], which is essentially a compendium of statistical information; or the sweeping polemic in [Mironov 1994].

⁴ As Steve Smith has pointed out in this journal: see ‘Cultural Anthropology: The State of the Field’ // *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*. 2004. No. 1.

to incisive historicisation. *The continuities are always so much more evident than the breaks.*' One could add that historians are conventionally interested in the social structures and mechanisms of power, and ethnographers, anthropologists, and folklorists in the symbolic manifestations of culture, and (in the first two cases, at any rate) in the mechanisms of social control and the maintenance of consensus that these ensure. In the essentially stable model of society that is accepted by these disciplines in their classical manifestations, it is not clear how traditions would be 'renewed', degenerate, or significantly alter, at all.

Yet such explanations are insufficient. First, within 'neo-traditionalism' itself, 'tradition' is assumed as a trans-historical category (its possible diversity over time is ignored, since its content is reduced to whatever preceded the drive to modernise).¹ Second, practitioners of 'neo-traditionalism' have tended to ignore even anthropological work of an explicitly historicised kind.² A recent example of such work from outside the Russian field is Neil L. Whitehead's *Dark Shamans: Kainama and the Poetics of Violent Death*, an analysis of how a form of 'assault sorcery' (where victims are stalked down and tortured to death by means of various obscene rituals) practised in mountain areas of Guyana has become a focus of 'hypertraditionalism' (as a method of intimidating outsiders and those espousing social change). Such work could provide a model for the investigation of Soviet political terror and its relationship to 'traditional' forms and meanings. As Whitehead argues: *'attention to the cultural meanings of violence, not just the violent act itself, is the key to advancing understanding'*.³

Another case would be the issue of historical memory. Much has been written about the place of commemoration — as sponsored by the state — in Russian culture, but the detail of 'traditional' practices has been more or less ignored.⁴ Conversely, a recent study of *'artful selective oblivion'*, or *'the myriad artful modes of expelling things and thoughts that distress us or have become obsolete'*, suggests a comparative context for the equally important mechanism whereby the past

¹ I have to say that this is true also of my own recent study [Kelly 2001], an analysis of the Westernisation of behaviour models which is concerned only marginally with the 'traditional' practices remoulded by written behaviour codes.

² One might contrast the sensitivity to revisionist views of 'traditional' culture in the historiography of nineteenth-century Russia, see e.g. [Frank 1999], or the essays in [Frank, Steinberg 1994].

³ [Whitehead 2002: 191].

⁴ For example, [Merridale 2001] bases its discussion of traditional attitudes to death (ch. 1) on a handful of un glossed and uncontextualised references to the Tenishev Archive, some decades-old Anglo-American anthropological studies, and selective secondary literature, largely in English. The work of such Russian scholars as V. V. Ivanov, Olga Sedakova, A. K. Baiburin and others is ignored.

is effaced or obliterated.¹ Equally, the continuing debate on the extent to which ‘Bolshevik language’ became disseminated at the Soviet grassroots as a means of expression, and as the testimony of altering world-views, could acquire greater sophistication if more attention were paid to technical features such as genre and register, and to the question of whence members of the Soviet working class and peasantry acquired their ideas about what was communicatively appropriate.² ‘Political conformity’ would then become part of a much larger set of choices about etiquette and protocol — indeed, about social relations in the broadest sense. Here, say, Svetlana Adonyeva’s study of the performance conventions of the *chastushka*, and its role for collectively sanctioned self-expression — at once personal and supra-individual — might provide food for thought [Adonyeva 2004].³

It was precisely a sense of the need for greater dialogue between historians of Russia, especially Soviet Russia, and those working in other disciplines concerned with the study of culture — folklore, ethnography, anthropology — and also, by association, of the need for greater dialogue between Western specialists and Russian specialists, that prompted the organisation of ‘The Dangers of the Known World’, a one-day conference devoted to (for want of a better term) ‘Russian popular culture’.⁴ The participants included an anthropologist (Caroline Humphrey), an ethnographer (Albert Baiburin), a social and cultural historian (Steve Smith), and a specialist in Russian folklore and popular culture (Faith Wigzell). The three discussants, on the other hand, were drawn from scholars working in different areas of social and cultural history — discourse analysis,

¹ [Forty, Küchler 1999: xii]

² To date, many studies in the ‘Soviet subjectivity’ direction have concentrated on concepts such as ‘values’, without reference to the precise language in which these were expressed or to their possible content in ‘traditional’ terms. See e.g. [Hellbeck 1996]. Equally, Stephen Kotkin’s phrase ‘*speaking Bolshevik*’ is now ubiquitous, but as a shorthand for mental processes, not a definition of stylistics. For studies that are more attentive to linguistic features, see e.g. [Gorham 1996; Gorham 2003]. [Kelly 2002] is a study of one specific genre in terms of prescription and practice. [Fitzpatrick 2005] deals with some cases where communicative stereotypes impacted on the expression of identity, e.g. ‘file selves’ (the way that people write about themselves when filling in official forms, etc.). However, the book does not consider how people absorbed the ‘poetics’ of this genre, or of other genres under consideration, such as the written denunciation. Russian-language studies of this material are significantly more detailed, see e.g. [Utekhin 2004].

³ Material of this kind would also have relevance to recent debates on ‘Soviet subjectivity’: it suggests an essentially situation-dependent concept of self which goes beyond ‘the liberal subject’ criticised in [Krylova 2000], but which does not run the risk of imposing an equally unitary alternative concept (as is the danger with the approach adopted in Hellbeck’s study of Podlubnyi).

⁴ The conference was presented as a ‘New College Symposium’, i.e. one of an informal series of inter-disciplinary intellectual discussions organised by Fellows of New College, University of Oxford. Previous topics in the series have included the phenomenon of blindsight, dance in the Renaissance, biography, etc.

in the case of Daniel Beer, and of Polly Jones, and the history of everyday life, in the case of Stephen Lovell.¹

Two of the participants (Wizzell, Smith) were to some extent concerned with the ways in which ‘popular culture’ or ‘folklore’ has been interpreted within intellectual tradition, both by politicians and ideologues and by academic specialists. But the primary purpose of the conference was to explore intellectual and spiritual manifestations lying beyond ‘modernity’, in the sense not only of post-Enlightenment intellectual culture, but also of the commercialised, urbanised environment that has in recent years increasingly come to stand for ‘Russian popular culture’.² The title, ‘The Dangers of the Known World’, emphasised the paradoxicality (from a ‘Western’ point of view) of a cultural system that could (and can) understand the world as at once familiar and beyond control. Indubitably, an association between knowledge and power also obtained (obtains) in this system, but its workings were more vulnerable because of the understanding of knowledge (language) as something with a physical, as well as spiritual, existence of its own — an understanding wonderfully conveyed by Albert Baiburin’s paper on traditional concepts of language. This was a world where knowledge could be (indeed, had to be) handed down,³ but where it could also be destroyed (through the annihilation of the human vessel containing it), or more importantly, exhausted — where it was embodied (in the most literal sense) in particular individuals, rather than freely disseminated or, conversely, stored up in manufactured resource centres — archives and museums.

As well as their emphasis on the ‘otherness’ of this material, the participants had in common some other concerns, for example the powers (whether constructive or destructive) inherent in language, requiring regulation and conservation (Humphrey, Baiburin), or the persistence of convictions about the real existence of supernatural/superhuman powers after the demise of ‘traditional’ society as generally understood (Wizzell, Smith).⁴ All of the papers also expressed (whether explicitly or obliquely) what one might term the

¹ Readers may wonder why there was no discussion for Albert Baiburin’s paper. This was given as an Ilchester Lecture in the University of Oxford, and by tradition such lectures are never followed by a discussion. The reasons for customs of this kind are hard to find out, but I suspect that they are etiquette-derived: that it was not considered suitable to subject a distinguished visiting scholar to an academic inquisition.

² See e.g. [Barker 1999]; and compare the thrust of the discussion in ‘Cultural Anthropology: The State of the Field’ // *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*. 2004. No. 1.

³ On the need to hand down knowledge in order to harness its potentially destructive powers, see e.g. [Arsenyeva 1999].

⁴ These papers complement e.g. [Melnikova 2004], which emphasises the permeability of Russian rural culture to ‘modern’ information about the planets during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

difficulties of retrieval: the problems of dealing with ‘traditional culture’ at one remove. This raises, to begin with, the familiar problems of perceiving another culture at second hand, from descriptions and recordings, through the lens of collectors who themselves had particular preoccupations. Some elements in Russian ‘traditional culture’ may be over-emphasised in documents and chronicles dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (for example, those appealing to observers convinced of the tight relationship between folk belief and pre-Christian culture); some elements are elided to the point of non-existence. For example, the ethnographical record leaves open to unaided speculation the question of cultural transmission — how historical subjects learned about traditions. Children are invariably presented as having rituals performed upon them. The process by which one turned from a participant in a ceremony to an actor in this (put simply, from an object into a subject) lies beyond the evidence presented in the sources. And, as Daniel Beer’s comments, in particular, make clear, the interpreter of ‘traditional culture’ is also faced with the question of how far to emphasise the transformative presence of the observer him- or herself — the ways in which particular genres or statements may be produced with him or her in mind (or, in the precise case of importance here, the ways in which such genres may be responses to cultural intrusion of another kind — from the proponents of *Realpolitik* on a larger scale). In Caroline Humphrey’s paper, on the other hand, epistemological problems of another kind present themselves — how the researcher or interpreter of ‘traditional culture’ might deal with the issue of what is withheld or deliberately concealed; how to deal with the silences of informants, even those who are well-disposed to the investigator.

The papers and the comments suggest that discussion and dialogue about such questions has only just begun. As Polly Jones suggests, the crucial analytical issue of inertia versus intention remains open here, as in the past: *‘Did Soviet culture seek to co-opt folk beliefs into a cynically syncretic discourse to which their (at least initially) peasant and illiterate audience would be receptive? Or was the apparent similarity between older linguistic prohibitions and the Soviet censorship an ironic coincidence, perhaps born of the subconscious beliefs of Soviet leaders themselves (as has been argued repeatedly of the seminary-trained Stalin)?’* And this is just one of many ‘accursed questions’ left for future debate.

Equally, the discussion here does not altogether escape disciplinary anxieties — in particular, whether the methodologies espoused by ethnographers and folklorists lose site of the questions of agency, social structure, and change with which historians are quintessentially concerned, or conversely, whether historians might be inclined to discount continuities and deeper, non-topical meanings. But the

value of the encounter lay precisely in raising difficult questions — about the nature of tradition and of transformation, about continuities and discontinuities in attitudes to danger and knowledge, and about the nature of language itself, whether as an instrument of emotional and sententious articulation, an attempt to capture ‘the world beyond’, or as a material phenomenon in its own right, as tangible, but also as elusive, as paper, stones, or bread.

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