Kirill Chistov (20 November 1919 – 29 October 2007)

For me, Kirill Chistov was and always will remain important not just for his crucial role as a folklorist and theorist of culture, but as someone who could be said to have set the tone of the era that has ended with his death. It is impossible to imagine what the intellectual climate in Leningrad after the Second World War would have been like without him. It was no accident that so many older people, as well as people from my generation, should have reflected constantly on what Kirill Vasilyevich would make of their actions and of their aims in life. This applied especially to the area where the demands of good scholarship and those of moral standards more generally were indistinguishable, falling within the remit of what could be described as *human decency*. In the Soviet era, this concept had a quite specific and not at all banal meaning: it referred to a code of behaviour that was under constant pressure from political *force majeure* and that was rather hard to observe in practice. Kirill Vasilyevich was someone who embodied that code of behaviour in action.

I first heard the name of Kirill Chistov when I was in my second year at Tartu University. Garik Superfin, then a student in the year above me, asked whether I had bought Chistov's book,

Sotsialno-utopicheskie legendy [Russian Popular Utopias]. At that point, I was no more interested in folklore than I was, say, in medieval Russian literature, but something about the way that Garik asked the question made me realise that the book was essential reading. From then on, I made sure I read every word that Kirill Vasilyevich wrote; along with Propp, Meletinsky, and Boris Nikolaevich Putilov, he provided me with crucial points of orientation in the study of folklore, in ethnography, and in the history and theory of culture more broadly, and my later academic interests were directly derived from his own.

After the viva for my undergraduate dissertation (devoted to the wedding ritual), Yury Mikhailovich Lotman said to me, ‘You should go and study with Kirill Vasilyevich Chistov. I’ll write to him about you.’ I was lucky: six months later, Kirill Vasilyevich took me on as a research student, and from then on I never stopped learning from him, even when I had long acquired research students of my own.

This should not be taken to mean that Kirill Vasilyevich was given to offering guidance in an overt way, still less that he was didactic. Even when I argued things that were frankly daft, he refrained from open comment. His usual reaction was to come up with some story that at first sight appeared to have nothing to do with the case in hand – but that instantly made one see the entire situation from a different perspective.

The first time I met him (in September 1972), Kirill Vasilyevich struck me as a typical middle-aged academic, a rather worn-out one, even, who obviously spent his entire life peacefully working through books and papers. In terms of his life as lived at that precise point, this may well have been right, but ‘peaceful working through’ certainly doesn’t describe the earlier part of his life accurately, since it included time in the army, and a spell of imprisonment, not to speak of the grim years after the War.

Kirill Vasilyevich graduated from university just before the War broke out. He had studied in the philological faculty at Leningrad University, where his lecturers had included, as well as Propp, such legendary figures as Boris Tomashevsky and Boris Eikhenbaum. His teacher in the domain of Russian folklore was Mark Konstantinovich Azadovsky, whom he regarded with love and devotion all his life. There was no formal requirement for those studying in the philology faculty to attend lectures on ethnography, but everyone knew that serious study of folklore was impossible without a knowledge of ethnography, and all the more so since the lecturer on the subject happened to be Dmitry Konstantinovich Zelenin.

Kirill Vasilyevich began his graduate studies after the War; later, he spent fifteen years working in Petrozavodsk at the Institute of Linguistics, Literature, and History of the Karelian Branch of the

Academy of Sciences. This was where he completed his candidate's dissertation, 'The Folk Poetess I. A. Fedosova' (the defence was in 1951); here, too, he was eventually to become head of the Section of Literature and Folklore, while also lecturing at the Petrozavodsk Pedagogical Institute. His academic and personal ties with Petrozavodsk remained close throughout his life.

In 1961, Kirill Vasilyevich returned to Leningrad, having been invited to become head of the Department of the Ethnography of the Eastern Slavs at the branch of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences in that city. He was to spend the rest of his life working here, both before and after the Leningrad part of the Institute was renamed the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera). Under his leadership, the Department was transformed into a research centre of the first importance, staffed by such leading ethnographers and folklorists as Tatyana Stanyukovich, Nikolai Novikov, Boris Putilov, Tatyana Bernshtam, and others. What is more, the research carried out in the Department addressed not only traditional culture – as was the case with every other department in the Institute – but contemporary culture as well. By Kirill Vasilyevich's own efforts, a research group was set up to address ethnosocial processes – something that was not just unusual in the 1970s, but even risky, in a political sense. The members included Natalya Yukhnyova, Galina Starovoitova, and Marina Kogan, and also Tatyana Shchepanskaya, whose originality of approach was so highly valued by Kirill Vasilyevich, and who was working on youth culture.

Alongside his work running the Department Chistov became, in 1980, the General Editor of *Soviet Ethnography*. Since the journal's editorial office was in Moscow, this meant having to travel to the capital on an almost weekly basis. And as if this load were not enough, Kirill Vasilyevich for many years chaired the Governing Body of the Institute of Ethnography, alongside co-ordinating an international team of authors working on a three-volume collection devoted to the ethnography of the Eastern, Western, and Southern Slavs, and acting as the editor of countless other collections and of other people's monographs. His contribution to what academic bureaucrats would call 'research management' was truly monumental.

All the same, it was always Kirill Vasilyevich's own scholarly work where his heart lay. Like any folklorist, he recognised the special nature of Karelia as a kind of 'nature reserve' for oral culture, and when he was working in Petrozavodsk, he of course made maximum use of the unique resources in the locality. As a faithful successor to Mark Azadovsky, he never considered folklore as something impersonal, separate from those who had created it. Indeed, the figure of the creator of folklore and his or her internal world interested him just as much as the texts themselves. It was no accident that his first sub-

stantial study was a biography of Irina Fedosova, from whom were recorded possibly the most vivid and important examples of formal laments that have come down to us.

It was also during Kirill Vasilyevich's time in Petrozavodsk that his intense interest in the ethnographical particularities of the Russian North began to form. What was more, instead of emphasising the archaic roots of this culture (as was then customary), Kirill Vasilyevich insisted that it was in fact of relatively recent origin, which explained why it should be so exceptionally energetic and creative. In essence, he succeeded in forming a new conceptualisation of the regional characteristics of Russian culture — one that is now generally accepted. And his move to Leningrad did not make Kirill Vasilyevich any less interested in these issues. Indeed, one of the main directions of the Department of East Slavonic Ethnography was to become the study of the traditional culture of northern European Russia, as expressed in a series of multi-handed volumes under the general title 'The Russian North', and also in the publication of monographs by different members of the Department (and particularly Tatyana Bernshtam).

It may seem curious that Kirill Vasilyevich should have decided, after his study of Irina Fedosova and the formal lament, to move his attention to such a highly specific phenomenon as utopian legends, but that is a superficial impression, since it was precisely in his early work that his interest in social psychology and the history of collective ideas had been established. In any case, *Russian Popular Utopias of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries* (1967) was received with great enthusiasm. The book became a real event not just in folklore studies, but in the history and theory of culture and in ethnography as well. Not surprisingly, reviews of the book appeared in journals across the disciplinary range. It was perhaps the first case where an analyst of folklore had genuinely applied an interdisciplinary approach (rather than simply flourishing their intentions to do this), and the results were impressive. The book is recognised to this day as a unique phenomenon in the Russian study of folklore; this was recently confirmed by its republication (in a new and significantly expanded edition).

In the 1970s, Kirill Vasilyevich not only considerably broadened the issues that he examined, but also adopted new approaches to these. Given that he was beginning to take a close interest in areas of folk life that went well beyond textual production, it was natural that he should also be preoccupied by the interrelationship (conceptual and practical) between folklore and ethnography. In 1970 appeared the first in a series of multi-handed volumes under the general title *Folklore and Ethnography*: it opened with a article by Kirill Vasilyevich himself that functioned as a programmatic statement of the questions

at issue. All of these volumes consisted of papers from a series of conferences under the same title which made an enormous impact on folklorists and on ethnographers alike. I think it would not be too much to say that they were signs of a period of exceptional energy and achievement in Soviet folklore studies and ethnography, one when the discussion of culture was gradually breaking away from evolutionist and positivist models. The personal efforts of Kirill Vasilyevich, and later of Boris Nikolaevich Putilov, meant that conferences were regularly held and volumes regularly issued right up to the middle of the 1980s.

Another initiative of this kind was the publication of a collection of essays, *Problemy slavyanskoi etnografii* [The Problems of Slavonic Ethnography, Leningrad 1979] to mark the centenary of the birth of Dmitry Zelenin, for whom 'folklore' and 'ethnography' had never been separate phenomena to begin with. Kirill Vasilyevich invited me to act as the co-editor of this book, which was not only a great honour for me, but also a thorough training in careful and reflective editorial work. I should add that Zelenin's writings always had an exceptional significance for Kirill Vasilyevich, as is shown by his initiation, many years later, of a translation into Russian of Zelenin's *Russische (Ostslavische) Volkskunde*, which appeared in 1991.

Anyone who is concerned with cultural theory relating to folklore or ethnography has sooner or later to examine the word 'traditional' and to illuminate its role in culture. For his part, Kirill Vasilyevich devoted a number of exceptionally interesting works to this issue; they were to become the basis of a new shift in research in this area generally[1]. I have in mind here his work on ethnic processes, or to be more accurate those processes that had impact upon intellectual and spiritual culture.[2] This was an entirely new direction in the work of the Institute, and it was Kirill Vasilyevich who offered leadership. The result was another multi-handed volume, *Sovremennye etnicheskie protsessy v SSSR* [Current Ethnic Processes in the USSR, Moscow, 1975], which was awarded a State Prize of the USSR in 1981. Kirill Vasilyevich was responsible not just for planning the book in an overall sense, but also for deciding on the contents of its different sections. The problem of relations between different Soviet

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1 These different discussions were united in K. V. Chistov's monograph Narodnye traditsii i fol'klor [Folk Traditions and Folklore], published in 1986.

2 Before these writings of Chistov appeared, the main theme of Soviet ethnography (following Academician Yulian Bromlei) was the so-called 'theory of ethnos', the formulation of abstract questions about what an ethnos was and what its functions might be. Chistov was able to reorient the field towards an interest in the actual processes of ethnic relations that were observable in the contemporary Soviet Union, focussing in particular on how traditions functioned to shape concepts of ethnic identity (especially in the context of inter-ethnic marriages).

nationalities was to become central to the work of one of his most talented pupils – Galina Starovoitova.

In the 1980s, work was begun again on the international project 'The Ethnography of the Slavs', culminating in the publication of *Etnografiya vostochnykh slavyan: Ocherki traditsionnoi kul'tury* [The Ethnography of the Eastern Slavs: Studies of Traditional Culture, 1987], with Chistov as general editor. As it happened, this was the only part of the project that actually came to fruition (the planned volumes on Western and Southern Slavs, which were being directed by academic contacts in Poland and Bulgaria, were not in fact completed). As always, Kirill Vasilyevich's part in the work did not stop at editing. He was also the author of four chapters and the co-author of two chapters of this monumental compendium of material on the traditional culture of the Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians.

The 1990s were a period of painful confusion and self-doubt for Russian academia in general. Everything that had been done in the Soviet period came up for reassessment, and inevitably, by no means everything that had once been considered authoritative retained its former standing. It was only work that retained its appeal in a radically new context that survived. And Chistov's work is placed by the students and graduate students of today alongside such brilliant and famous scholars as Propp, Meletinsky, and Putilov.

As for Chistov himself, in the 1990s he turned to a type of material that had never been studied before by Russian folklorists, beginning work on letters home from Russians deported to Germany during the years of the Second World War. The source material came, the letters themselves not having survived, from a card index of excerpts (with over 1300 entries) compiled by the German postal censors during a few months at the end of 1943 and beginning of 1944, and discovered by chance during building work at the Deutsche Volkliedsarchiv in Freiburg. The compiler appears to have been someone with a good knowledge of Slavonic languages, including expertise in dialectology, ethnography, and folklore. Having survived by happy chance, the collection saw the light of day (both in Russia and Germany) thanks to the selfless efforts of Kirill Vasilyevich and his wife, Bella Efimovna Chistova (a Germanist), who for almost sixty years had combined sharing in his academic projects with running the Chistovs' large and welcoming household. The book not only made these unique documents available to other scholars, but pioneered the study of non-orally-transmitted folklore in Russia. Since then, written texts of this kind have become one of the most widely researched areas of popular culture, attracting attention from historians and anthropologists as well as folklorists.

Kirill Vasilyevich's last book, *Zabyvat i styditsya nechego* [Nothing to Forget and Nothing to be Ashamed of, St Petersburg, 2006] pays

tribute to his parents, to his brother Vasily, to everyone else to whom he owed his spiritual development (Samuil Marshak, Vera Adrianova-Perets, and others, as well as Azadovsky and Propp), and also to friends such as Lev Dmitriev, Evgeny Maimin, and Dmitry Likhachev, and to those he himself had nurtured and lost (Galina Starovoitova). Things were brought to a fitting conclusion: indeed, there was nothing he might have wanted to forget, nothing to be ashamed of. Only a man who had enjoyed real happiness could have summed up his own life with such serenity.

Albert Baiburin