

Anna Sokolova

## Funerals without a Body: the Transformation of the Traditional Funeral Rite<sup>1</sup>

Over the past 150 years, researchers have been recording a gradual and uninterrupted process of departure from the traditional norms of life. This process often takes forms that are hard to document, so that it is only the fact that the norms have changed that can be noticed. There are, however, cases where the departure from traditional principles takes place over a limited period, so that the causes and structure of the process may be easily seen. Such is the case with the transformation of the traditional funeral rituals amongst Russians<sup>2</sup> which has occurred in certain regions over the last decade. The reform of the registry office system and the growth of the undertaking business have created conditions in which the body of the deceased is taken to the mortuary immediately after being pronounced dead, and is prepared for burial there without

**Anna Sokolova**

Russian Academy of Sciences,  
Institute of Ethnology  
and Anthropology,  
Moscow  
annadsokolova@gmail.com

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on material collected during fieldwork carried out in 2005, 2009 and 2010 in the Selivanovo Region, Vladimir Province. It was collected in the course of a field trip on the theme of 'The Transformation of Family Rituals among Russians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Selivanovo Region, Vladimir Province)' from 19 June — 11 August 2010, and also from separate observations in the Melenki Region, Vladimir Province (material collected in the course of a field trip on the theme of 'Sacred Spaces in the Memory of Central Russia: Memorial Signs at Places of Sudden Death' from 21–28 September 2010) and Tula Province (material collected in the course of a field trip on the theme of 'Sacred Spaces in the Memory of Central Russia: Memorial Signs at Places of Sudden Death' in November 2010). The material was collected using questionnaires put to the population, and specialised questionnaires for representatives of the Orthodox Church, employees of the registry office, undertakers, and mortuary workers, and also using included observations while taking part in burial rituals in the village of Yuromka, Selivanovo Region, Vladimir Province. The author is grateful to employees of Ritual-Servis Ltd., funeral directors, for their assistance in carrying out the research.

<sup>2</sup> On traditional Russian funeral rites see, for example, [Kremlyova 2000].

the participation of the relatives. All that is left for them to do is choose the lining for the coffin, the flowers and the wreaths. This means that the most important part of the funeral ritual takes place as it were ‘in the absence of the deceased’, which destroys the structure and meaning of the funeral ritual as a rite of passage [Van Gennep 2002: 135–150].

According to van Gennep [ibid.], the funeral ritual is divided into two stages: the separation of the deceased from the society of the living, his nearest and dearest, and his incorporation into the society of his departed ancestors. The first stage includes the washing and dressing of the body, placing it in the coffin, taking leave of it and carrying it out of the house. The reading of the Psalter marks a threshold, when the reading of the holy text over the coffin protects the soul of the departed at a complex time of transition. It is these most important aspects of the rite that have been affected by innovations in the funeral ritual resulting from factors external to the tradition.

### 1. Soviet policy towards rituals

The spiritual culture of the Russian people underwent radical changes in the twentieth century. In terms of life-cycle rituals, of which the funeral ritual is one, we are confronted by a fact unparalleled in European history — a state-sponsored campaign to create, work out in detail, and inculcate a new civil, non-religious set of rituals in place of the traditional one, which was closely tied to religion. It is worth noting that the only analogy to such a campaign that the world has ever seen was the short period following the French Revolution, as both Russian [Polishchuk 1987: 3] and foreign [Binns 1979: 585–606] researchers have remarked, but this did not have such far-reaching consequences as the comparable experiment in the Soviet Union.

The basis for change in this sphere may be found in the nineteenth century, with the first examples of so-called civil memorial services.<sup>1</sup> These are seen by N.S. Polishchuk as the model for the Soviet ‘red funerals’. In her words:

The first [such funeral], ‘unprecedented [...] both in the number of people present and in its appearance,’ was the funeral of N. A. Nekrasov<sup>2</sup> in December 1887. It was the first to dispense with the traditional order of the funeral procession: the priest — the hearse (or coffin carried by bearers) — the mourners. At

<sup>1</sup> For more detail see [Polishchuk 1991].

<sup>2</sup> i.e. the poet Nikolai Nekrasov (1821–1877), a leading figure in the Russian radical movement of the 1840s — 1860s. [Editor].

Nekrasov's funeral the procession was 'spontaneously' headed by a crowd of young people with some enormous wreaths 'adorned with inscriptions' [Polishchuk 1991: 34].

In the same article, Polishchuk studies in detail the many spontaneous demonstrations at the funerals of worker-revolutionaries in 1905, which were 'a strange amalgam of the traditional (religious) and new (civil) rituals' [Polishchuk 1991: 35]. However, while before the revolution such rituals had the character of sporadic protests, after 1917 they became a systemic phenomenon.

Besides the material factors tending towards change in family rituals during the twentieth century, such as the changes in the structure of the family and of society itself, there was another force influencing the process. The change in ritual practice (like that in festival culture) was legitimised and encouraged by the new state. Rituals and holidays of a new type became part of the campaign of state agitation. Such an attitude towards holiday rituals on the part of the new revolutionary order is perfectly natural (we may compare the new holidays and rituals of the French Revolution), considering that a holiday is a nucleus for the positive consolidation of society (as opposed to dissatisfaction or mutiny as a nucleus for negative consolidation), and family rituals, like other rites of passage, legitimise a person's new status. Besides, revolutionary agitation was organised as the complete antithesis of the previous order (on the lines, we shall raze the old world to its foundations), and in particular of everything connected with religion. New rituals were needed not simply to mark an individual's new status, but to proclaim the creation of a new man, hitherto unheard-of, man born of the revolution.

In the years immediately following the revolution this process was in many respects spontaneous.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the basic layouts for so-called 'red christenings', 'red weddings' and 'red funerals' were worked out shortly after the end of the Civil War [Brudny 1968: 66–67], though they fell into decline by the beginning of the 1930s [McDowell 1974: 265–79]. According to Sheila Fitzpatrick [Fitzpatrick 2001], it is reasonable to assume that the waning of the new Soviet rituals and the loss of interest in them on the part of the state are connected with the change in direction of ideological work in the years of the 'Great Break', when the centre of attention shifted from revolutionary resistance to its enemies to the naked coercion connected with collectivisation.

<sup>1</sup> See the description of one of the first recorded 'red christenings' or *oktyabriny*, which took place in 1923 in Serov [Brudny 1968: 69–70]. A good example of the spontaneous nature of 'red' rituals is given by [Leontyeva 2011].

It was not until after the war, at the end of the 1950s, that ‘the question of the inculcation and dissemination of Soviet civil rituals [...] was once more brought forward as one of the most important questions of the development of culture and atheist education’ [Kampars, Zakovich 1967: 26]. At that time there began a wide social discussion connected with the development and inculcation of new socialist rituals which was reflected in a number of publications in various national newspapers,<sup>1</sup> leading scholarly and social journals<sup>2</sup> and monographs.<sup>3</sup> The First All-Union Conference on Socialist Ritual took place in Moscow in May 1964. The Second All-Union Conference on Socialist Ritual took place in 1978. In the interval there were many local conferences on the same subject: March 1965 in Sverdlovsk, April 1965 in Baku, and November 1966 in Ulan-Ude.

## 2. Funerals in the urban environment

The campaign to introduce the new rituals had a certain amount of success, particularly in the urban environment. At the same time, country districts retained much of the ‘pre-revolutionary rituals’.

The city was much more receptive to the new rituals for a variety of reasons. In the first place, the workers, intelligentsia, and white-collar workers of the city were to a large extent cut off from traditional peasant culture, which was the chief bastion of the traditional religious rituals and beliefs. This gap is clearly visible as early as the 1920s, when the overwhelming majority of the evidence of ‘red’ rituals is from the worker and urban milieu. In the second place, the city was more thoroughly incorporated into the propaganda system. In the third place, life itself in the city was radically different from life in the country and often offered no opportunity for conducting traditional rituals. Urban man was naturally cut off from the peasant community, which had always been the prime participant in any ritual, and his way of life was quite different, creating numerous problems in trying to carry out series of rituals that involved many people and continued over several days. Besides, the rhythm of work in the city often prevented the ritual from being conducted.

These circumstances still obtain today. In particular, where funerals are concerned, the majority of families prefer not to keep the body at home but to have it removed to the mortuary, and the leave-taking ceremony, be it religious or secular, is performed there or at the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, [Kriger 1959; Barvinsky 1959; Churakov 1959; Fayzulin 1961].

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, [Kryanev, Popov 1963].

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, [Kryvelev 1960; Pechura, Serdant 1960].

cemetery. In addition, over the Soviet period, the very culture of domestic leave-taking died out, and in modern urban conditions it is often difficult to carry out.<sup>1</sup>

The basic process characteristic of the change in urban funerals is that people gradually ceased to want to keep the deceased at home until the time of the funeral. On the one hand this process was the result of purely practical considerations, above all the high population density of urban, especially communal flats. It is obvious that the presence of the body in its coffin for several days would be a considerable inconvenience to a family of three or four persons living in a single small room. At the same time a city possesses a number of mortuaries, which means that people do not have to keep the body at home until the funeral. As a result it became the norm in large cities to take leave of the departed at the mortuary, at the cemetery or in church (if the departed was given a religious funeral). It is interesting that in small or medium-sized towns (particularly among families that still have some connexion to the countryside) leave-taking takes place at the entrance to the building in which the deceased lived, so that the neighbours can also say goodbye to him.<sup>2</sup> This is a sort of compromise between urban conditions, which preclude the presence of the body at home for a long period, and the village tradition, according to which the house in which the deceased lived is a key locus for the funeral rite, the place where he is prepared for his transition to the next world, where his nearest and dearest take their leave of him, and from which he sets out on his last journey.

### 3. Funeral rites in the village at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries

The traditional ritual is thus dying out in the urban milieu. In the villages, by contrast, the set of rituals is much more completely preserved. This is also confirmed by research from the Soviet period. In particular, N.A. Nosova writes in her dissertation on 'everyday Orthodoxy' in Vladimir Province that 'in contrast to the small number of religious marriages, there are more religious than secular funerals, a greater percentage even than baptisms. According to the data for 1966 and 1967, about 70 % of the funerals in Vladimir Province were religious (relative to the overall death rate), and of these about 50% had a separate church service, while 18–19 % had a funeral with the body present in the church' [Nosova 1969: 201].

<sup>1</sup> According to undertakers in Vladimir, instances where the relatives choose to keep the body at home until the funeral are exceptional (information from Ritual-93 Ltd., Vladimir).

<sup>2</sup> Information from informants (f., 27, born and living in Vladimir, and m., 30, born in Vladimir and living in Moscow) and from undertakers (Ritual-93 Ltd., Vladimir).

The preservation of the ritual is favoured by occupations and habitations that are different from those in the city, but the main reason is that until recently there was practically no real mechanism for its modification. The commissions for new rituals created by rural councils in the 1960s and 1970s for the most part concentrated their work on developing and propagating ceremonies connected with birth and marriage, and did little more than register the fact of death. The exceptions were the deaths of significant figures within the village — revolutionaries, war veterans, party functionaries, officers, collective farm chairmen and suchlike. In their case the village soviet, the veterans' soviet, or some other organisation would organise a ceremony of leave-taking at the cemetery or the house of the deceased, with a funeral meeting, band and volleys of shots. But when an ordinary worker (agricultural, industrial or white-collar) died, the whole burden of organising and conducting the funeral fell upon the shoulders of his relatives. In this case it was natural to have recourse to the traditional funeral ritual.

The fact that the introduction of a socialist funeral ritual had relatively little success is not only explained by the fact that the commissions for new rituals were less interested in it than in other kinds of ritual. It is also the case that the prescriptions for conducting funeral rituals described in detail only the final act of the ritual — the last farewell, the funeral procession, the actual burial, and to a certain extent the wake on the day of the funeral. And even when a special committee was set up to organise the funeral in accordance with the 'Recommendations for conducting the funeral ritual',<sup>1</sup> and the civil memorial service was 'properly' conducted, the preparation of the deceased's body for burial was still the responsi-

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<sup>1</sup> It is not possible to cite the 'Recommendations for conducting the funeral ritual' in full in an article of this size. We shall quote a small part of the 'Recommendations' concerning the preparation and beginning of the ceremony: 'On being informed of the death of a colleague or of a member of his family, the administration and personnel of a state or co-operative undertaking, institution or organisation shall set up a commission to organise the funeral. Taking account of the wishes of the family of the deceased, the commission shall decide how the funeral is to be conducted, when and where the civil memorial service is to take place, and whether to invite a funeral director, choir, band, etc. to take part. Care should be taken during the period of preparation for the funeral of the symbols and attributes of mourning. The colour of the lining of the coffin is to be chosen as follows: for elderly persons, red with a black border; for a child, pink with a black border; for a young person, white with a black border. A guard of honour, with black armbands on their left arms, should stand on either side of the coffin. The coffin shall be placed either in the home of the deceased or in the club belonging to the organisation where he worked to allow people to take their leave of him. Quiet funeral music shall be played or sung at the moment of leave-taking. Only relatives and close friends shall remain in the room where leave is being taken of the deceased for the last 15–20 minutes before the coffin is removed. After the leave-taking the coffin shall be carried out to the sound of funeral music. If appropriate it shall be preceded by a lowered flag with a mourning band, then a portrait of the deceased, the wreaths, his orders and medals, and then the lid of the coffin (narrow end first). Then the men (except for the closest relatives) carry out the deceased in his coffin. Immediately after the coffin come the relatives and close friends. The persons who carry the coffin and its lid shall wear black bands on their left arms.'

The full version can be found, for example, in [*Sotsialisticheskaya obryadnost* 1985: 316–329], or an abridged version on the 'Funeral portal' website.

bility of his relatives, who ordered their actions according to the experience of previous generations, and not according to the ‘Recommendations’ of the commission for new rituals, especially since the latter did not go beyond questions of dress or the colour of the coffin.

It should be noted that in country districts the mortuary could be situated at best in the local administrative centre, so that conveying the body there, and then back again to the house or the cemetery, was complicated by the great distance involved, the unsatisfactory condition of the roads, and the considerable cost.

Furthermore, where the ‘struggle with the remnants of religion’ was concerned, the people who developed the new funeral ritual addressed only a narrow range of problems and in fact went no further than rejecting church funerals and criticising lavish wakes. Their recommendations did not so much enter into a polemic with the traditional ritual, as describe an outline of the proposed socialist ritual.

The overall structure of the ritual thus remained undisturbed, in spite of the campaign to develop and inculcate a new form of socialist ritual. There is no doubt that the funeral ritual was significantly simplified in comparison with pre-revolutionary practice,<sup>1</sup> so that by now, for example, ritual lamentations have practically died out.

The situation remained the same in the post-Soviet period. In addition to what has already been said, it must be mentioned that in the Soviet period the number of working churches and priests was so few that church funerals were rarely possible. This resulted in a widespread recourse to not entirely traditional forms of funeral services — in absentia or at home.<sup>2</sup> Later, with the re-opening of

<sup>1</sup> On the pre-revolutionary funeral ritual of the inhabitants of Vladimir Province see [Zavoyko 1914: 87–100].

<sup>2</sup> Funerals conducted in absentia or at home are recognised by the Church, but it is preferred that the funeral should be conducted with the deceased in church. When the funeral is conducted in absentia, at the end of the service the relatives of the deceased are given a wreath (*venchik*: a band of cloth with images of Jesus Christ, the Mother of God and John the Baptist with the prayer ‘Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy upon us’), the prayer of absolution, and earth from the memorial table. When they get home they place the wreath on the forehead of the deceased and the prayer in his right hand, and sprinkle the earth in the form of a cross over his body, which is covered with a sheet. (On funerals conducted in absentia see, for example [U Boga 2007: 10–13].) When the funeral is conducted at home, the priest comes to the house where the deceased lived and conducts the funeral where the body is. Attitudes towards funerals conducted at home or in absentia vary among priests. We quote here the opinion of Archpriest Artemy Studentov, rural dean of the Selivanovo deanery: ‘Soviet tradition cut it out completely, it prohibited it. That is when funerals in absentia began. Someone would come to the priest and say “Father, take the funeral. Someone’s dead, we’re burying him tomorrow.” And there would be a secular ceremony with a band. [...] So there were very few funerals here, and I can’t remember one being held in church. It would be a special case if someone’s funeral were held in church, and then only if it were some old woman and it wouldn’t cause problems for her relatives — they’d just be villagers. So the basic form that developed was the funeral in absentia. And that was how

churches and the opening of new ones, the situation began to change.

The influence of the inculcation of socialist rituals on village funeral rites can be clearly seen from an instance which we recorded in the village of Sokolye, Melenki Region, Vladimir Province. This village was founded in the 1930s and was in the Soviet period a local centre of the peat-cutting industry, and also of the Komsomol movement. This allows one to suppose that the local population were quite highly involved in the process of ideological propaganda. Indeed, according to the employees of one of the funeral agencies in Melenki, the inhabitants of this village are quite unusual in their funeral traditions: they organise mass meetings or demonstrations when they take their leave of the deceased.<sup>1</sup> The inhabitants of the village themselves testify to the existence of such a tradition. Such a practice is uncharacteristic of the region as a whole, but fully corresponds to the recommendations for conducting secular memorial services,<sup>2</sup> although the origins of the tradition are quite hard to trace. It should be said that all the undertakers we asked said that secular funerals are not a widespread practice, except for the funerals of senior military officers, directors or other persons of social significance. At the same time, a more detailed analysis of the funeral practices of the villagers at Sokolye revealed that the ‘funeral mass meeting’ is the only real difference from the traditional funeral ritual of the surrounding area. For example, in Melenki region it is traditional to use ceramic bowls made by a family firm in the village Korovino<sup>3</sup> when washing the bodies of the dead. According to informants from Sokolye, the purchase of these bowls

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funerals at home started too. Because in principle, before the revolution nobody had their funeral at home, everybody had it in church. [...] But it [the funeral at home — A.S.] was what people got used to, it became very firmly rooted. [...] As for funerals in absentia, they should be held very rarely, that is, in particular cases. That is, when there’s no possibility to have the funeral in church or at home, I don’t know, if someone died in a fire that destroyed his house. [...] Or else a funeral in absentia in church... for example, someone died somewhere else, and was buried in a hurry for some reason, perhaps his body had been found after he’d been lying dead in the woods for some days, or something else, hypothermia for example, all kinds of things can happen, a single person living alone, they could be buried in a hurry too. [...] So that is an unusual sort of funeral, in absentia. But as a rule there are two sorts: in church or at home. Of course the church funeral is preferable. That is, people should try to bring their dead to church and I try to tell everybody that and make them understand it. But different things can happen. [...] So you go to their house and take the service there. That is allowed. If you can arrange everything properly. That is, you should have a table, and iconostasis with icons and lamps, *kollyba* [a ritual funeral dish based on boiled wheat], that is, you have to do everything just the same [as in church — A.S.]. That is, candles too, and the people standing. You agree on the time, the people come and stand and light their candles and pray, and you have the funeral there... That is a good funeral. This is where he lived, this is where he departs from us. That is all right, there is nothing wrong with that.’

<sup>1</sup> Information from employees of Ritual Ltd., Melenki.

<sup>2</sup> See for example [*Sotsialisticheskaya obryadnost* 1985: 316–329].

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that, according to the people who work at that firm, the same bowls, known as *cherepki*, are also used in wedding rituals.

is one element in an old person's preparations for death, and they go together with his so-called funeral suit. This example shows how fragmentary the changes to the funeral rituals have been: they have affected the funeral only indirectly.

#### **4. The appearance of funeral agencies and their role in changing the funeral ritual**

Thus for a variety of reasons village funerals were the least affected by the transformational processes that significantly altered family rituals in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the situation has begun to change sharply over the last ten years. We have traced these changes by the example of the funeral ritual in Selivanovo Region, Vladimir Province. Paradoxically, it has not taken much to make radical changes at the beginning of the twenty-first century to a traditional pattern of behaviour which had remained unchanged throughout the Soviet period.

The process began with the centralisation of the registration of births, marriages and deaths, which took place in 2006 with the law 'To Grant the Agencies of the Vladimir Province Regional Government State Powers in the Registration of Acts of Civil Status'. This deprived the village councils of their right to register births, marriages and deaths, and vested it exclusively in the offices of the Registry Office (ZAGS). Depending on the region, there may be registry offices only in the regional centre (as in the Kameshkovo, Kirzhach, Kolchugino, Selivanovo, Sudogda, Suzdal and Yuryev-Polskoy regions), or in the regional centre and certain other towns (as in the Aleksandrov, Vyazniki, Kovrov, Murom, Petushki and Sobinka regions). In the Gus-Khrustalnyi and Melenki regions the number of registry offices corresponds to the administrative division of the region into village and urban settlements: thirteen offices in the Gus-Khrustalnyi and eight in the Melenki Region. This last circumstance shows that *de facto* the centralisation of the registry office system has not taken place in those two regions.

This was followed by the appearance of a large number of funeral agencies in the villages, since the centralisation of registration made their activity more profitable. This is connected with the fact that, being obliged to register a death at the registry office and not at the village council, anyone engaged in organising a funeral is forced to go to the regional centre (or in some cases to some other major town), and is thus able to receive information about the work of the funeral agencies. Such agencies did of course exist before this, but their role and the extent of their penetration into the countryside has changed.

Funeral agencies offer a wide range of services not confined to the actual funeral. They can arrange transport of the body to the mortuary and to the cemetery, can wash and dress the deceased, sell and line coffins, sell wreaths and clothes for the dead, dig graves, prepare and put up monuments, and in some cases act as intermediaries in the organisation of church funerals, sell religious funeral requisites, and assist in obtaining death certificates and other documents. Some agencies are also responsible for maintaining cemeteries. Different agencies offer different ranges of services.

Furthermore, with the appearance of a large number of funeral agencies, the relatives of the deceased were no longer forced to keep the body at home until the funeral, but could have it taken to a mortuary. Thus the situation described above, typical of the middle of the twentieth century, when the services of the mortuary were more or less unavailable, was fundamentally changed. Now, with the transport services provided by the funeral agencies, the possibility of keeping the body in the mortuary until the funeral has become widely available and is restricted only by its cost. It is important that the funeral agency will also, in such a case, be able to prepare the body for burial.

In our opinion, it is possible to identify several basic patterns of event leading up to the funeral and in one way or another determining the changes in the funeral rite.

1) If a person dies in hospital, his body is removed to the mortuary, where in the majority of cases a post-mortem takes place; this may be dispensed with only at the request of the relatives.<sup>1</sup>

If a person dies elsewhere, there are three possible ways that events may unfold.

2) If it is not possible to establish the cause of death, or if there is a suspicion of unnatural causes, or if one of the other factors enumerated in note 17 is present, the body is taken to the mortuary for autopsy.

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the order of the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation No. 82 of 29 April 1994, 'On the conduct of post-mortems' (accessible on the site [*Normativno-pravovye dokumenty*]) 'The autopsy may not be dispensed with in the following cases:

- 3.1. When it is impossible to make a definitive clinical diagnosis of the disease leading to death, and (or) the immediate cause of death, irrespective of the length of time spent by the patient in hospital;
- 3.2. When there is a suspicion of an overdose or intolerance of medicines or diagnostic preparations;
- 3.3. In cases of death: connected with prophylactic, diagnostic, instrumental, anaesthetic, resuscitatory or curative interventions during or after a blood transfusion; from an infectious disease or suspected infectious disease; from cancer in the absence of any histological verification of the tumour; from a disease resulting from an ecological catastrophe; pregnant women and new mothers (up to the last day of the perinatal period);
- 3.4. Requiring forensic investigation.'

3) As stated above, the relatives may have the body taken to the mortuary at their own request.

4) If the cause of death can be established in situ from data such as the deceased's medical records, evidence of witnesses etc., and if none of the factors listed in note 17 is present, there is no need for a post-mortem and the body may remain at home until the time of the funeral.

Thus in accordance with the order of the Ministry of Health there are circumstances in which the body of the deceased may, at the desire of his relatives, not be subject to any post-mortem examination and may remain at their disposal until the time of the funeral. In this case the relatives may prepare the body for burial themselves, and also organise the funeral themselves, or they may seek the help of a funeral agency.

The further development of events depends largely on which of the above patterns took place.

If the body remains at home, then usually the traditional funeral ritual is followed, with the relatives and friends of the deceased preparing his body for burial, washing it, dressing it in special clothes, and readers (*chitalki*)<sup>1</sup> read the Psalter over the body for three days and nights. This is more or less typical of current practice in Melenki Region, Vladimir Province. At the same time transport and the digging of the grave may be provided by the funeral agency.

If for one reason or another the body of the deceased is in the mortuary (whether or not a post-mortem has taken place), then the relatives do not take part in its preparation for burial. This is done by employees of the mortuary or the funeral agency, between whom it is not always possible to make a clear distinction. At the same time, depending on the wishes and financial resources of the family, the body may either 1) be brought home in the middle of the second day; or 2) brought home (either brought inside the house or not) on the day of the funeral; or 3) taken straight to the cemetery. The

<sup>1</sup> Although in principle the Psalter may be read by anyone, in practice this is done by women called *chitalki*. They are usually elderly women without many family ties or professional responsibilities. Most often it comes about after the death of one of their relatives, when the woman at first begins to pray for that person, and is then invited to do so for other people. To be a *chitalka* she has to learn to read the Psalter in Church Slavonic. *Chitalki* enjoy great authority in village society. Formerly they not only read the Psalter over the dead, but also baptised babies, and performed other necessary rites such as the consecration of cemeteries. The Psalter is usually read by three *chitalki*, but there may be fewer (or more) depending on how many of them there are in the village at the time. They take turns in reading, and each is supposed to read twenty cathismata three times. In order to do this, they have to spend the night by the coffin. Even so, the *chitalki* themselves assert that it is better for the dead person if his relatives do the reading. It is the custom to give alms to the *chitalki* in the form of something belonging to the deceased or else food, though in recent times they have sometimes simply been given money.

second option is the commonest. This pattern holds good not only in the villages, but, as our informants assert, in the city of Vladimir as well. In these cases a number of the most important actions (and therefore also the people who perform them), such as the washing of the body by the local specialist using ritual objects (such as the *cherepki* mentioned in connexion with Melenki Region), are omitted from the ritual, as are the use of these ritual objects and the reading of the Psalter by the *chitalki*. Even so, while the traditional forms of washing the body are no longer practised, the reading of the Psalter may either be omitted altogether or take place in an abbreviated form.

The desire to bring the body home from the mortuary on the second day (1) may be seen as a sort of compromise between the necessity of having a post-mortem and the attempt to preserve the traditional funeral ritual, especially in those areas where post-mortems are conducted in almost 100 % of cases. This is particularly important in view of the belief held by the population that, unlike the funeral service, which may be conducted altogether in absentia, the reading of the Psalter has to take place only with the body in its coffin present in the house. However, as a result of the high cost of transport, this variant is not very popular.

Thus the funeral agency may have various degrees of involvement in the events leading up to the funeral. The extent to which a particular variant is used depends on the actual conditions in the region in question. The material available to us allows us to state with a certain degree of confidence that the extent of the involvement of funeral organisations in the funeral ritual depends on the entrepreneurial qualities of the undertaker, the existence of healthy competition in the funeral services market, and also on the level of administrative pressure, which may be expressed in a tendency towards the centralisation of the system of registry offices or the interest of law-enforcement agencies in conducting universal pathological examinations. It goes without saying that a conclusion about the full extent of the reasons for variation in the phenomenon in question and their geographical distribution will only be possible after very extensive field work.

The most radical variant has become widespread in Selivanovo Region, Vladimir Province. Here a post-mortem is carried out in almost 100% of cases. This practice is connected with preventative measures undertaken by the law-enforcement agencies towards preventing violent deaths among old people.

As the population, and the employees of the mortuaries and funeral agencies testify, no exception is made even for people who have died in old age after long illnesses; only in individual cases does it provoke

a violent protest, so that occasionally relatives have been able, citing religious reasons, to prevent post-mortems from being carried out on the bodies of old people. Everyone else, as a rule, accepts the situation as an unavoidable evil. In any case, we have not recorded any mass protests, even though it is in clear opposition to tradition. From interviews with the inhabitants of the region it is clear that they do not regard the traditional practices as applicable to the present day. To direct questions about one or another element of the funeral ritual which has been lost as a result of the present situation (such as those surrounding the washing of the body), the standard answer is something like 'we don't do that nowadays, that's all done in the mortuary now.' Only the impossibility of reading the Psalter in the absence of the body and (in some cases) the inability to have full control over the clothes in which the deceased is dressed are regarded as serious problems. Informants do not regard this as a question of prime importance. This can be seen from the fact that when talking about the traditional funeral ritual they often do not mention it without specific prompting by the interviewer. We should stress that in many cases it is a question of extremely small local groups among the population, sometimes consisting of three to five old people, who would probably be physically incapable of carrying out the complete traditional ritual by themselves in situations where their younger relatives, who live in the towns, express no desire to take the solution of the problem upon themselves.

The typical course of events in Selivanovo Region from the moment when death is pronounced outside hospital to the time of the funeral is as follows. After death is pronounced, the police arrive with a pathologist. Once the police have recorded the event the undertakers take the body to the mortuary, where an autopsy is carried out. After that the mortuary workers or the undertakers prepare the body for burial: they wash it and dress it in clothes either provided by the relatives (and often prepared in advance by the deceased) or purchased by the relatives from the agency. At the same time the relatives order everything necessary for the funeral from the agency and obtain the necessary documents. They choose the clothes, the lining for the coffin, the flowers and the wreaths. This usually takes place on the second day after death. On the following (third) day, the undertakers transport the body to the appointed place, usually the home of the deceased. We should note that as a rule the relatives are not involved in transporting it. After leave-taking in front of the house, a bus takes the coffin and the relatives to the cemetery. Thus a large part of the funeral ritual takes place 'without the body'.

The situation in Selivanovo Region is perhaps not the commonest, but it is by no means unique. In particular, there is similar evidence

of a large number of autopsies from some regions of Tula Province (as our research has established), and also in Smolensk Province.<sup>1</sup>

In this way a comparison of the situations in two neighbouring regions, Selivanovo and Melenki, which has to a certain extent been made in this article, allows us to propose a hypothesis describing the transformation of funeral rites amongst the Russians over the last decade, the essence of which is as follows. The present situation may be characterised as a rapid change in the ritual which runs counter to tradition and is brought about by the appearance of an intermediary who contracts to carry out one or another part of the ritual. The presence of an intermediary in the ritual life of the family, or of rural society may be the result either of the relatives' own initiative or of administrative pressure. As can be seen from the examples cited, the situation may be very different even in neighbouring regions, but the boundaries between the distribution of the different variants correspond closely to the administrative boundaries of the regions, which confirms the supposition of the role of the administrative factor. The centralisation of registry offices has been a significant stimulus towards the modification of the funeral ritual and toward the more active role taken by the intermediary. We should stress that while the conscious and deliberate operation of Soviet propaganda was unable to achieve any change in the funeral ritual, it is now taking place over a short period of time (three to five years) without any planned or intentional reforms on a national scale.

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