

RUSSIAN FOLKLORE

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Overview Russian literature, dance, music and many other arts have been deeply influenced by folklore, which has also been an important element in the lives of the Russian people. The vastness of Russia and its ethnically diverse population prevented it from being considered as a unified state until relatively recent times. However, its geographic location virtually ensured that Russia would be exposed to the traditions of neighboring peoples in various ways from the acceptance of Christianity in the 10th century through the destruction and domination of the Tatars in the 13th. In this period elements of Russian folklore made their way into both secular and religious works, although the Orthodox Church disapproved of many of these traditions, regarding them as works of devil. Nonetheless, it is evident from numerous historical works and memoirs from the 16th and 17th centuries that folklore, and folktales in particular, remained popular in Russia.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Paganism: Like most pagan peoples, the pre-Christian Rus' revered numerous gods and spirits, particularly the gods of the heavens, and prime among them was Perun, the god of thunder. Traces of old pagan beliefs and practices have survived up to the present in folklore and some folk traditions.

In addition to their own traditions, the folklore traditions of neighboring peoples such as the Finns, the non-Russian peoples of Siberia and nomadic Turkic tribes, have also influenced the Russians. Written works from the 11th through 14th centuries give evidence of the survival of folkloric traditions, although until the 18th century attitudes towards them were ambivalent.

Christianity: With the conversion to Christianity in the 10th century in the reign of Vladimir I, many pagan practices and beliefs continued to survive, but in new forms that were acceptable to the Orthodox Church. According to the Primary Chronicle, Vladimir I had constructed a shrine to the pagan gods, but ordered the images of the gods destroyed the day before he was baptized. The images may have been destroyed, but the gods they had represented often reappeared in the guise of Christian saints. In a notable example, Perun's thunder-making powers were transferred to the prophet Elijah. The forms of magic and divination previously practiced by pagan sorcerers was now sometimes practiced by the lower clergy.

Dvoeverie (dual faith-ditheism): The merging of pre-Christian beliefs and rituals with Christian ones is frequently labelled 'dual faith'. The pagan thunder-god Perun, equated with Thor by the Varangians, was identified with the biblical prophet Elijah, and Veles, god of wealth and cattle, became Saint Blasius. Pagan traditions were especially prevalent in rural communities and the borderlands. Many peasants merged Christian beliefs and practices with the older, local pagan practices. This dual faith meant that many Russians were publicly and overtly Orthodox, but still held to the old ways in the privacy of their homes.

Folktales: Although Christianity rapidly spread and became a part of the everyday life following Vladimir I's conversion in the 10th century, old folktales remained popular, particularly among the peasantry. The Orthodox clergy, on the other hand, opposed the survival of folklore in any form due to the fact that many of these traditions contained elements of pre-Christian beliefs, concepts, practices and ways of thought. Among these were tales of daily life before Christianity, animal tales, magic, initiation rites, ancestor worship, totemic beliefs, and human sacrifice.

Russian folklore has its roots in ancient pagan Slavic beliefs, many of which have been preserved in Russian folktales. The oldest epic poems (or songs) from the time of the Kievan state, called *bylina* (sg.), were most fully preserved in the Russian north, and in Karelia in particular.

Byliny (Epic Songs): Between the 10th and 14th centuries a type of epic called *byliny* (pl.) emerged. *Byliny* were a type of short story, often in the form of a poem that was sung and accompanied, at times, by a type of string instrument called a *gusli*. Their topics varied from events in the Kievan state, nomadic groups, the deeds of Novgorod, and mythology. Three different groups played a role in the dissemination of *byliny*: travelling performers, *skomorokhi*; peasant performers, *skaziteli*; and itinerant pilgrims, *kaliki perekhozhie*. Although *byliny* were initially recited by professional bards in the courts of the nobility, over time they came to be sung or recited by peasant storytellers in rural areas. The theme of many Russian *byliny* is some variant of the hero's quest; for some reason the hero, *bogatyr*, leaves his home, is given a task or tasks to accomplish, accomplishes his task or tasks in spite of numerous obstacles, and, in the end, becomes wealthy or gains the hand of a beautiful maiden. Popular heroes in many *byliny* are Ilya Muromets, Alyosha Popovich, Sadko, and Dobrynya Nikitich. Frequently encountered villains include Vasilisa the Beautiful, Ivan the Fool, Grandfather Frost, Baba Yaga, the Firebird, the immortal Kashchey, etc.

Epic Poetry: The distinguishing characteristic of epic poetry is heroic content. The heroes of epic poetry strive for their people, not for petty, personal interests. These heroes must use all of their abilities to overcome the difficulties in their path and be willing to even sacrifice themselves to attain their goals, but in epic poetry this is their path to success. One of the most famous examples of Russian epic poetry is *The Tale of Igor's Campaign (Slovo o polku Igoreve)*. This anonymous work, written in Old Russian, is set in the context of the feudal conflicts 12th century Russia and describes the unsuccessful campaign led by Prince Igor against the Cumans in 1185. The poem describes Igor's defeat, escape from captivity and eventual return to his people and serves as a warning to other Rus' princes on the need for unity in the face of continuing threats from Turkic tribes.

POSTCLASSICAL – EARLY MODERN PERIOD

The Orthodox clergy was still opposed to the collection of folklore, storytelling, and folk celebrations in the first half of the 17th century. For example, Abbot Panphilus wrote against what he regarded as popular pagan celebrations, stating that these festivals and songs provoked immoral behavior in women that, in turn, constituted a terrible temptation to sin in men and youths. With literacy virtually limited to churchmen, there are practically no collections or descriptions of folklore from this period. Nonetheless, some folkloric elements were incorporated into hagiographic literature, such as the story of the 15th century saint, Mercurius. In this story St. Mercurius is described as returning from a battle with the Tatars carrying his severed head under his arm.

Storytellers: Despite religious opposition, professional storytellers, *skazochniki*, were frequently found in the courts of nobles as entertainers, and were popular among other social classes as well. They were sometimes hired by workers such as hunters, lumbermen and fishermen in northern Russia to entertain workers during their breaks.

Folk dance: Ancient Russian dance was religious in nature, a part of organized pagan rituals where dances were performed in honor of the gods. Ancient folk dance *Khorovod (karagod, tanok, krug, ulitsa)* is originated as part of pagan rituals performed both to honor the sun god, Yaril, and to show repentance. The songs and the dances were slow with participants holding hands, generally in the middle of a circle created by three women. *Plyaska*, is another folk dance performed by one dancer, pairs, or numerous dancers, this folk dance is characterized by passionate movements, emphasizing the dancer's individuality. The music for this dance is a traditional instrumental form of music whose origins pre-date Kievan Rus. The ancient folk dance *Pereplyas* is performed in pairs, this dance takes the form of a competition with each dancer attempting to outdo the other through a display of skill, power and talent. *Prisyadka* (Cossack Dance) is danced by men, this folk dance is characterized by kicks performed from deep squats. The other folk dance *Barynya* is a fast, spirited folk dance characterized by squats and stomping, the *barynya* is accompanied by *chastushka* (folk song) and is improvised, rather than following a set pattern. The folk dance *Kamarinskaya* is characterized by losing oneself in the dance, improvisation, and strong emotion. *Chechotka*, on the other hand, is performed by a *bayan* (accordion) player wearing *lapti* (shoes made of birch bark fiber), the *chechotka* is a tradition Russian form of tap dance. Troika is named after the traditional Russian sled pulled by three horses, this dance is performed by one man and two women. *Trepak* is characterized by *prisyadka* (kicking from a deep squat), this lively Cossack dance is generally performed by

men. *Yablochko* is generally considered a sailor's dance, it is performed to accompaniment of *chastushka* folk songs.

Folk Music: The origins of Russian folk music extend back to the settlement of European Russia by Slavic tribes in the middle of the first millennium CE. Russian folk music, the vocal and instrumental music of the peasantry, consists of songs and dances performed for entertainment, religious purposes, and work. There are also songs commemorating ritual events or seasonal events, as well as music for *korovody*, circle dances, and the more rapid *plyasovye* and *chastye* dances. Among both urban and rural populations in the late 19th century a related form, the *chastushki* (lively music to accompany satirical or humorous four-line verses) became quite popular. In the Soviet period folk music was regarded as an art form that had emerged from the people, and both the study and performance of folk music was given official support in the 1930s. One result was the emergence of a new type of folk music, the Soviet folk song, with lyrics praising socialism and the Soviet state set in traditional folk melodies and arrangements.

A variety of instruments was often used in Russian folk music. Among the stringed instruments are the *gudok* (an ancient string musical instrument, played with a bow); the *gusli* (a multi-string plucked instrument); the *balalaika* (a three-stringed triangular-bodied lute); and the *domra* (a three- or four-stringed round-bodied lute). Wind instruments include the *svirel* (pennywhistle), and *zhaleyka* (hornpipe). Other common instruments are the *bayan* (accordion), the *buben* (a hand percussion musical instrument), and the *treshchotka* (an idiophone instrument which is used to imitate hand clapping).

NINETEENTH CENTURY

The study of Russian folklore was radically transformed in the 19th century. Oral folktales began to be collected, being transformed in the process, and folktales and other folkloric elements made their appearance in literary works. The first writer to make use of folktales in his writing was Aleksandr Pushkin, who then went on to make collections of folk songs in the 1820s-1830s. Pushkin was soon followed by other writers such as Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Zhukovsky. These writers collected folk-songs and folk-tales, incorporated them into their works, and made them an element of the Russian identity.

The compilers of folktales generally categorized these stories by genre, although the criteria for determining a particular story's genre vary. Tales of magic and the supernatural, *volshhebnye skazki*, may include enchanted objects, ogres, witches, spirits, dragons and vampires. However, approximately 60% of all Russian folktales fall into the category of *bytovaia skazka*, or everyday tales. The most recent genre of folktales, these tales emerged from the peasantry and their worldview, and the heroes of these stories are often the poor and workers. About 10% of Russian folktales are animal tales, *skazka o zhivotnykh*. In these, animals with human qualities frequently appear to aid the human characters in the story. In addition to these genres, there are also religious, allegorical and satirical folktales, although the line between these stories and the everyday tales is often ambiguous. However, they all revolve around peasant life, giving voice to their dissatisfaction.

Ballads: This genre of poetry only appeared in the early 19th century, inspired by German romantic poetry. Generally, on the themes of family and romantic relationships, their subject matter is less diverse than the *bylina*. Vasily Zhukovskiy is generally regarded as the first composer of Russian ballads, with his first, "Lyudmila", written in 1808. Ballads were eventually displaced by shorter songs called *chastushki*.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the Soviet period individuals were allowed to create folklore, since it was regarded as the artistic expression of the masses. The preservation of Russian folk culture was promoted in Soviet rhetoric, and funds were provided for the promotion of folk music and dance. Despite the rhetoric and funding, there was no official policy to revive folk culture due to the fear that folk tales might contain subversive elements harmful to the socialization of children.

Folklore was initially regarded as a reactionary relic of the past in the years immediately following the revolution, and Soviet writing in the 1920s was dedicated to the promotion of communist ideals and values. As a result, folklore was viewed very negatively; Proletcult (Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations) leaders claimed that because folklore reflected *kulak* (wealthy farmers') attitudes it should be eradicated. The successor to Proletcult, RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) shared similar attitudes, also calling for the elimination of folklore. Despite the attitude of these organizations, in the late 1920s folklore began to be used as a means of self-expression among some Russians. Due to this interest in folklore, different groups worked in tandem in this period, producing some of the most important studies on Russian folklore.

In the 1930s the attitude towards folklore shifted further in parallel with the massive changes in Soviet society imposed by Stalin. Folklore was now seen as one more means to increase support for Stalin's programs. However, the true revival of Russian folklore emerged among academics in the Khrushchev era, with increased performances of folk dances and folk music following almost a decade later.

Noviny: An innovative form of folksong from the Soviet period was the *noviny*, "new songs", so called to distinguish them from the *stariny*, "old songs". Combining elements of historical songs, *byliny* and laments, *noviny* imitated traditional folksongs in many respects, but used themes from modern life as their subject matter. *Noviny* were composed to celebrate Soviet heroes of all types as well as Soviet civilian and military leaders. These Soviet heroes and leaders are depicted as having the same degree of resourcefulness, courage and self-sacrifice as the traditional heroes of *byliny*, Alesha Popovich, Dobrynya Nikitich and Ilya Muromets. The Tatars of the *byliny* have been replaced by the "whites", led by Idolishche ("the most monstrous idol"), as the opponents of the new heroes. Idolishche, symbolizing the tsar and his regime, is depicted as being cowardly, arrogant, gluttonous and cruel.

Soviet Folktales: In addition to creating Soviet folksongs, folktales based on Soviet themes were also composed. Centered on collective farm workers, Soviet military figures and civilian leaders, and workers, these new tales used very few of the traditional motifs, and Soviet tales of magic were generally intended to be understood allegorically.

Letter-poems: Following the enactment of Stalin's first five-year plan in 1928, folklore studies came under increasing criticism and pressure since folklore was now regarded as expressing support for both the tsarist regime and capitalism. In place of the old epic poems, letter-poems addressed to Stalin began to appear in the mid-1930s. These letter poems were initially drafted by folk performers and professional poets, and then revised in subsequent meetings until a final version was agreed upon. This final version would be signed by tens of thousands of people and then sent to Stalin. Letter-poems were also composed to mark important occasions for workers or other professional groups in factories, cities or districts.

After Stalin: Russian folklore was freed the pressure and constraints that it had endured for decades when Stalin died in 1953. *Noviny* and the Soviet folktales came under withering criticism as pseudo-folklore, with no connection at all with genuine Russian folklore. The use of archaic imagery from *byliny* in contemporary *noviny* was deemed to be completely inappropriate and the Soviet folktales were branded as merely unsuccessful attempts at literature.

Eventually, folklore scholars were able to return to academic studies of folklore, and folk singers were under less official pressure than in previous years. However, folk singers were still expected to perform for the nation's benefit, and in support of officially sanctioned social and political ideas.

The academic study of Russian folklore has enjoyed a revival since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with scholars now able to freely research all aspects of folklore, including previous banned topics such as tales referring to or linked to the West. Many stories have been published in their uncensored forms, and folklore studies have been pursued in line with approaches common in the West. In addition, there has been an effort to return to the timeless and culturally significant sources of pre-Soviet folklore.

Discussion/Questions

1. What is the effect on a nation's folklore when an authoritarian regime controls all phases of its creation, production, and, very often, its consumption?
2. Why was folklore, the reflection of a people's worldview and historical experience, regarded with suspicion by both Soviet leaders in the 20th century and the Orthodox clergy in the 17th?

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