

Aleksandr Etkind. *Khlyst (Sekty literatura i revoliutsiia)*. Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1998. 688 pp. No Price Listed, cloth, ISBN 978-5-86793-030-1.

Reviewed by Elena Krevsky

Published on H-Russia (June, 2000)

On the face of it, the subheading of this book (sects, literature, and revolution) appears quite obvious. The connection between revolution and religious sects, between political and religious undergrounds seems only natural, but 'literature' stands between them, and it is literature that comprises the major focus of the author's attention, even though 'sects' are listed first in the parenthesis. The author asserts: "Russian literature, philosophy, and political thought are not mirrors of the Russian revolution; on the contrary, revolutions were accomplished in texts and from there looked at their own historical reflection, always dim and faulty" (p. 21). Naturally, the author is mainly interested in "the texts that burst into the revolution," in the complex interaction of literature with religious and revolutionary movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. So the order in the subheading is precise: popular religious sects, through their literary representations, moulded dreams of Russian revolutionaries and, therefore, the Russian revolution itself.

An amazed reader quickly discovers that almost each prominent Russian writer of that period was fascinated with sectarians, especially with one particular movement that gave the book under review its title (*Khlyst* means a 'whip' and also a member of the popular sect). Danila Filippovich, a runaway soldier, founded *Khlystovshchina*, or *Khristovshchina* (Christ-Faith) in the seventeenth century. The members of the sect did not sever

their ties with the Orthodox Church; they attended all the important services. But they also gathered for secret meetings where they prayed, sang, danced (spinned), hoping that Holy Spirit would descend upon them. This joint spinning was the most characteristic feature of the *Khlysts'* ritual, well known to the general public. There were also rumors that each of the meetings ended with the members fornicating in ecstasy. Another important trait was the deification of leaders: a man would be considered Christ, a woman --the Virgin. [1]

The real histories of the *Khlysty*, *Skoptsy* (castrated ones), and *Tolstovtsy*, among many other religious groups, intertwine in this book with the stories of their representations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Russian discourse. The material is so manifold that the author needed twenty-three introductions, each with its own title and motif: "scandalous" (a description of one evening when several Russian writers were trying to imitate *Khlysts'* rituals), "apocalyptic" (the origin and nature of Western apocalyptic sects revisited), "genealogical" (the Russian revolution understood as a victory of a particular religious tradition), "historic" (Christ-Faith and Old Belief in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), and so on. These introductions occupy about one-quarter of the volume, whereas the conclusion is a brief three pages. Reading this book, one realizes how much all these twenty-

three preludes are needed; it is the only way for a theme to evolve in all its complexity. Chapters in the rest of the book are named after different people. Let us take, for example, part three, "Poetry." The titles of its chapters are "Dobroliubov," "Semenov," "Balmont," "Kliuev," and "Kuzmin."

Etkind calls his approach interdisciplinary and supplies the following list of methodological influences: Foucault, new historicism, historical sociology, and some concepts from psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and feminist studies. The influence of new historicism seems to be the most visible. Of course, we have to set aside the question of how much new historicism in turn was affected by Foucault, deconstruction, and feminist critique. New historicism was formed as a trend in literary studies in the 1980s; Etkind shares with its proponents a firm belief in the power of texts to shape reality. He (as other new historicists) tends to open the circle of textual analysis and bring in some "related practices" that allow additional insight into the works of art.[2] Going from studying a real historical rite, custom, or practice to its representation and then back to reality is a new circle employed by new historicism.

For Etkind, one such 'related practice' is *radenie*, the ritual of the Khlysts' clandestine meetings, in which collective praying, singing and spinning bring about the soaring and fusion of individual spirits. We encounter several descriptions of this particular ritual in the introductions. These descriptions are given by travelers, by ethnographers, by missionaries, by investigators, and by sectarians themselves. Etkind directly associates *radenie* as dissolution in a collective with the idea of *mir*, *obshchina* (community). Only *radenie* is a more radical mechanism in which "sectarians joined into communal feeling in a more intensive and unusually literal way" (p.81).

Sometimes it seems that the author's aim is to rewrite the Russian cultural and literary history of the turn of this century, to present each significant literary figure of this period in a different

light. Celebrated poems sound anew; widely known events acquire altered meanings; familiar figures prove to be affected by strange influences. To give but one example, let us turn to the remarkable figure of the religious philosopher Vladimir Soloviev. One of the most well-known episodes of Soloviev's biography is his public lecture in 1881 in which he appealed for pardon to the regicides of March 1, 1881. This plea, according to many accounts, cost the brilliant young professor his career.

But Etkind maintains that this appeal was not the only reason that Soloviev was dismissed. In his lecture, Soloviev juxtaposed "personal enlightenment" and "popular belief," giving to the latter the highest authority in the religious sphere. The word *Khlystovshchina* was not mentioned, but clearly Soloviev referred to the Khlysts' perception when he talked about the "living God" of the simple people. So the young professor was suspected of being not only in sympathy with regicides but also in sympathy with popular heretical sects. Etkind affirms that the sympathy with heretics could have been a decisive factor for Pobedonostsev, who handled the scandal.

Many other unexpected details, intriguing quotations, and archival revelations make this book fascinating reading, but its general framework proves to be traditional: the cultural contrast/contradiction between the people and the intelligentsia. The reference to Edward Said's *Orientalism* is refreshing: the people were perceived by the intelligentsia as the Other: "In Russia, relations between the intelligentsia and the people represented a special version of colonization and afterwards, decolonization" (p. 59). Aligning with the approach developed in *Orientalism* means sharing its pitfalls; one of them is excessive generalization.

Stuffing diverse materials (ranging from the early nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century) into one dichotomy necessarily means some disregard for historical perspective. I under-

stand that synchronic thinking is ingrained in philological work, so this section was not meant as a criticism. Rather, it expresses a bewilderment of a representative of the alien but friendly historians' tribe: does the opposition 'people-intelligentsia' provide the theoretical space necessary to explain why in the 1880s the intelligentsia were mostly interested in the Old Believers, casting Khlysts aside as heretics and fanatics, whereas twenty years later the Old Believers' image faded and the intelligentsia were enchanted by Khlysts?

To make his position logically consistent, Etkind needs to prove that the intelligentsia perceived the world of Russian sectarianism indiscriminately, as a whole, and that differences between the sects were unimportant and vague even for the sectarians themselves. He insists, for example, that "in historical context, the juxtaposition of Old Believers and sectarians has no prospect." In historical context, probably, but in the context of the Russian discourse of the late nineteenth century this juxtaposition seems absolutely necessary. One simply has to turn to the novels of Mel'nikov-Pecherskii, who was the first authority on these matters in Russian literature. These two movements are certainly juxtaposed in his narratives. Later in the book Etkind demonstrates how M. M. Prishvin (p. 467), A. M. Remizov (p.619), and V. D. Bonch-Bruевич (p. 637) perceived the profound difference between the two movements and refers his readers to the important article by Ronald Vroon exploring this difference.[3]

Considering the vast amount of information this book contains, it seems that the author simply did not have time to check all his references. Some mistakes and inaccuracies are quite understandable. I will mention only those two that stand out for me. Speaking of the literary prototype of Blok's Faina, Etkind mentions the "heroine-Old Believer of the same name from Mel'nikov-Pecherskii's novel *Na gorakh*" (p. 357, also p. 322). But Mel'nikov's heroine had a differ-

ent name, a softer one - Flena, Flenushka. Indicating the connection between Blok's poem *Solov'inyi Sad* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, he asserts that the latter "tells about the transformation of a debauchee into a castrated ass" (p. 372). Indeed, in one of his adventures, the Golden Ass was close to being castrated but he managed to escape.

Some interpretations seem hasty, unsubstantiated. The word *kruzhenie* found in a poem does not necessarily refer to the Khlysts' ritual, the word *raskol* might mean any disagreement, not only the historic schism. The preconceived context sometimes distorts understanding, transforms familiar texts and leaves the mystified reader, to believe together with the hero of the *Metamorphoses* "that every single object had been transformed into a different shape by some muttered and deadly incantation." [4]

Notes

[1]. In a very interesting article, Eugene Clay has argued that Khlysts were "perfectly Orthodox", and their faith "represented the elaboration of very Orthodox traditions by religious virtuosi from among the people." "The Theological Origins of the Christ-Faith [*Khristovshchina*]," *Russian History*, 15 (1988): 21-41.

[2]. This expression belongs to one of the founding fathers of new historicism, Stephen Greenblatt. See for example, Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

[3]. Ronald Vroon "The Old Belief and Sectarianism as Cultural Models in the Silver Age," in Robert H. Hughes and Irina Paperno, eds. *Christianity and the Eastern Slavs* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

[4]. Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994): 18.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit

educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Elena Krevsky. Review of Etkind, Aleksandr. *Khlyst (Sekty literatura i revoliutsiia)*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4191>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.