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Laura Engelstein. *Castration and the Heavenly Kingdom: A Russian Folktale.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999. xviii + 283 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-3676-5.

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Laura Engelstein's new book about the Russian Skoptsy -- men and women who willingly embraced self-castration believing that it provided the ultimate form of salvation for a Christian -- is difficult to classify. On the one hand, tracing the history of the Skoptsy's sect from its origins in the 1770s to the 1930s, the book is certainly a valuable contribution to the growing field of social and cultural studies of popular religion in the Modern period. On the other hand, it is an interesting case-study for the analysis of religious diversity in Imperial and Soviet Russia, a problem that has been studied from different perspectives by students of Old Belief and various sectarian groups.[1]

Religion, however, is not the only focus of the book. Engelstein's book is a study of social identity which engages with social inclusions and exclusions, the cultural meanings of the body and sexuality, the textual constructions of the Self and the Other, [mis]readings and [mis]representations of popular culture by the elites and vice versa, and, more generally, the place of the subjective, marginal, and unconventional in social and cultural history of Russia. The book is also an engaging story of a scholarly discovery, an archival saga, and a romance of the researcher's engagement with her subject.

The major contribution of the book is that it engages seriously with the language of popular religion, providing a critical but not patronising interpretation of the beliefs and ideas of the Skoptsy. Engelstein emphasises that the problem of self-inflicted violence on religious grounds, such as mass suicide and self-castration, is not culturally specific for Russian history, and cannot be seen as a national tendency to self-imposed torment (Daniel Rancour-Laferriere). She is also sceptical of the attempts to explain the Skoptsy phenomenon as psychopathology or repressed homosexuality (Aleksandr Etkind). Engelstein's interpretation of the Skoptsy phenomenon is intellectually evocative but hardly exhaustive. The historian 'depathologizes' the Skoptsy, places it into historical, cultural and social context, but she scarcely provides a profound analytical explanation of this religious phenomenon.

According to Engelstein, the Skoptsy, seeking to overcome the paradigm of human condition, consisting of birth, aging and death, intentionally separated themselves from the company of the same species and embraced the status of marginality in their society and culture. She emphasises that by challenging the social and cultural norms, and deviating from the core principles of Orthodox belief, the Skoptsy were not only looking for new spiritual experiences, but ultimately were seeking self-expression. The historian asks, "Why, given the range of potential languages and cultural forms, some inhabitants of the late Russian Empire chose to express themselves in this particular way?" Avoiding causal explanations, the author suggests that the Skoptsy's self-inflicted violence has to be understood in the context of the "endemic violence" of the antagonism between peasants and elites, corporal punishment, "popular anxieties about disease, pain and sexual performance, as well as intimate familiarity with biological reproduction" (p. 23).

Engaging with the symbolism and narrative structures of historical texts, including martyrologies, spiritual verses, community histories, court cases, ethnographic accounts, official reports, and personal letters, Engelstein suggestively demonstrates the ways in which the Skoptsy's identity was constructed from both within and without. But the historian's analysis aims to go beyond the interplay of the signifiers and narrative strategies in order "to delineate a three-dimensional world beyond the looking glass" of the Skoptsy's self-representations and the representations produced by outsiders.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter One, "Myths and Mysteries," locates the Skoptsy in the context of religious diversification of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tracing the spiritual origins of the sect from the Christ Faith (***Khristovshchina***) or Flagellants (***Khlystovshchina***), whose ecstatic forms of worship, strict asceticism and the role of charismatic prophets, both male and female, has attracted the recent attention of scholars such as Aleksandr Etkind and Eugene Clay. But despite the Skoptsy's explicit sectarian position vis-a-vis mainstream Orthodoxy, Engelstein speculates that the Skoptsy's renunciation of sexuality could have been strongly influenced by the ascetic and mystical traditions of the Eastern Orthodox church, which were expressed particularly in Orthodox monasticism. Despite the possible influences of the wandering holy men, she further argues-- quite arbitrarily applying Saussure's distinction between the signifier and the signified-- that the Skoptsy's interpretation of the Scripture was an obvious distortion of the traditional Orthodox doctrine, demonstrating the ways in which Scripture could be [mis]interpreted in order to legitimise theologically the ritual of castration.

Engelstein locates the emergence of the Skoptsy in the period following the plague of 1771, the violent peasant rebellion under the leadership of Emelian Pugachev (1773-4) that was followed by no less violent suppression of it by the enlightened empress, Catherine II (reign 1762-96), a period characterised by the upsurge of apocalyptic anxieties. While the plague preceded the Skoptsy's intention to "domesticate the awful unpredictability of the Last Judgement," the Pugachev rebellion had an important role in the founding myth of the Skoptsy's movement.

Based on the 1772 official investigation of the Skoptsy's sect in Orel province, during which about two hundred peasants were sought for questioning by the authorities, the chapter narrates the stories of individual and family conversions to the Skoptsy, collective worship, and the actual operation of castration that often took place in drying barns. It analyses the production of the founding narrative of the Skoptsy's sect, the martyrology of the Skoptsy's prophet, Kondratii Selivanov, in which historical facts and myth were intermingled, as evident from the story of the historical meeting between the prophet Seliv-

anov and Pugachev on his way to the exile in Siberia, which according to the historian could not have possibly taken place. Engelstein is sceptical of the possibility of Skoptsy authorship of the text (p. 38). She speculates that the "Passion" could be an invention of a ninteteenth-century folklorist, such as Vladimir Dal'. It remains uncertain, however, on what grounds she makes this supposition. One of the highlights of the chapter is the illustration of the ways in which Russian Imperial history was folklorised so as to become a part of the sectarian narrative, as with the story of Catherine II's discovery that her husband, Peter III, was castrated.

Chapter Two "Reports and Revelations," focuses on the external and internal threats to the Skoptsy's existence, such as the official interrogations, persecutions, deportations and renegades. It mainly focuses on the nineteenth century. Presenting an overview of Imperial legislation on the Skoptsy, the author points out the discrepancy between the claims of the regime that it targeted only actions "incompatible with the most important interests of private persons and with the basic demands of social morality" and its legal procedures that targeted individuals for their beliefs and convictions. She also is interested in the ways on which the "miscreants" circumvented the law, by lying in courts about their castration.

The chapter focuses on the ways in which the official knowledge of the Skoptsy's practices and beliefs was formed in the nineteenth century. The author demonstrates that the representations of the Skoptsy through the "looking glass" of a forensic expert, a folklorist, a bureaucrat and a representative of democratic intelligentsia provide more insight into the mind of the narrator than into the actual life of the religious community and its members. For example, the chapter offers a sharp criticism of such self-fashioned "custodians of Russian national identity" as Nikolai Nadezhdin, whose loyal reports to Nicholas I on the Skoptsy aimed at rehabilitation of his name from association with another Imperial suspect (Petr Chaadaev), and Vladimir Dal', the author of the 1844 report on the Skoptsy.

Chapter Three, "Boundaries and Betrayals," focuses on the Skoptsy community on the ground. It provides an analysis of the internal structure of the community, commenting on the family structure, gender and age composition; it offers interesting examples on the relations between the Skoptsy and the local Orthodox community, usually marked by hostility but sometimes by unexpected tolerance. Discussing the tactics of the Skoptsy in court trials, the chapter sheds light on their life in exile, showing how Siberia became "a crucible of [the Skoptsy] spiritual and collective identity" (p. 148).

The chapter raises more questions than it answers. For the reader, the power structure of the community and the status of non-castrated members of the community remain a mystery. Why did the debates about the place of the castration in the Skoptsy's economy of salvation emerge in the 1870s but not earlier on? It is difficult to agree with the statement that "castration for all that it was intended to clear the anatomical decks, left the patriarchal order unshaken" and with the point that "women were treated with disdain and distaste". (p.97) Both statements seem unplausible against the examples cited elsewhere in the book about the role of women acting as prophets and the initiators of castration.

Chapter Four, "Testimony of Faith," focuses on the Skoptsy at the turn of the century, "in the age of mechanical reproduction," when the Skoptsy actively acquired the new means of communication and self-representation such as photography and printed word. The chapter reflects on the role of literacy among the Skoptsy; the communication of Skoptsy intellectuals with the cultural authorities, such as Lev Tolstoi, a renowned critic of the conjugal life, and Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, a member of the Social Democratic movement, an expert in the history of Russian sects. A large part

of the chapter deals with the Skoptsy's self-made writer, Nikifor Latyshev, whose writings become the basis for the last two chapters of the book. Latyshev (b.1863), castrated as a child by his parents, presents the history of the Skoptsy community during the last forty years of the tsarist regime. Latyshev's writing, as Engelstein remarks, is not only a search of self-expression, but also "the story of salvation" (p. 165). She reflects on Latyshev's self-presentation and his dialogue with Bonch-Bruevich, describing it as a "relationship between two culturally disparate, intellectually dedicated men."

The Skoptsy's transition to the new post-revolutionary era is the subject of the last chapter, "Light and Shadow." This is a chapter about the reversals of the new regime's attitude to the Sectarians, challenges posed by the new political and cultural instruments of power and the survival of the individual Skoptsy through the 1920-30s. The transition of Bonch-Bruevich from an advocate of the Sectarians to the proponent of Soviet justice reflected a shift in Bolshevik policies towards Sectarians around 1928, the year of the Stalin revolution. The Skoptsy, increasingly identified with ***kulaks*** and other "un-Soviet" elements were deprived of property, tried and deported during the 1930s. Latyshev, however, as perhaps many others, managed to survive through this ordeal, keeping his pen-friend Bonch-Bruevich informed of all tribulations he experienced. The stories of miserable existence through the famine and food shortages are always counterbalanced by Latyshev's central identity as a writer. Latyshev's graphomanic exercises included not only writing to Bonch-Bruevich, but also to "the Greatest of the Great", Iosif Stalin, a letter that was never sent to Stalin directly but offered for deposit in the state museum to be safeguarded for future historians.

Latyshev's thank-you letter to Stalin begins and concludes the book on the Skoptsy. It leaves the reader slightly puzzled about the meaning and significance of this man's story in the history of the Skoptsy sect. Latyshev's learning for earthly readers had to do with his personal drive for recognition, as a self-made intellectual, castrated without his own wish as a child, rather than with the history of the community at large.

Throughout the book Engelstein argues that the Skoptsy confronted sexuality as a cause of "chronological imperatives of birth, aging and death" and that castration was not confined to a particular sex, but was applied by both men and women. One must agree with the author's emphasis on the universality of castration and its existential significance for both sexes. But the problem of the difference in the experience of castration by men and women and the terms in which male and female castration was characterised by outsiders need to be addressed. As for the latter, for example, Evgenii Pelikan's medical discourse quoted in the book quite explicitly identifies male castration with the "lack of noble aspiration, devotion to fatherland, manly courage, sense of duty or civic obligation" (p. 66). Apart from the view of sexual desire as cornerstone of social existence, the professor of forensic medicine purports a particular view of masculinity as defined by both sexual desire and civic virtues, establishing a causal link between the two.

The book can be recommended for graduate courses on cultural and social history of Russia. While soundly informed by intellectual debates and cultural theories, the book is free from the esoteric jargon of many cultural histories and will certainly find its readers among graduate students and the general public, if they do not find it too disturbing to gaze at the photographs of mutilated genitals and colourful descriptions of the acts of castration quoted from the forensic medicine experts.

Note

[1]. On Old Believers see Robert O. Crummey, ***The Old Believers and the World of the Anti-Christ: The Vyg Community and the Russian State, 1694-1855*** (Madison: University of Wisconsin

Press, 1970); Roy R. Robson, ***Old Believers in Modern Russia*** (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995); Irina Korovushkina "Gender and Salvation: The Old Believers in Late Imperial Russia", in Linda Edmondson (ed.), ***Gender in Russian History and Culture, 1800-1990*** (London: Macmillan, forthcoming); on Russian Sects see Alexandr Etkind, ***Khlyst: sekty, literatura i revoliutsiia*** (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1998); Eugene Clay, "The Theological Origins of the Christ-Faith [***Khristovshchina***]," ***Russian History*** 15, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 21-41; Nicholas Breyfogle, "Building Doukhoboriia: Religious Culture, Social Identity and Russian Colonization in Transcaucasia, 1845-1895," ***Canadian Ethnic Studies/Etudes Ethniques au Canada*** XXVII, no. 3 (1995): 24-51.

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