
**Reviewed by** Douglas Smith

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**Dueling po-russki**

Irina Reyfman begins her study of the Russian duel with a peculiar contradiction. She notes how Russian cultural memory has preserved an image of the Russian duelist as a man of irreproachable honor, one whose actions were characterized by elegance, discretion, magnanimity, and courage. The duelist embodied the true gentleman. He was one who lived—and died—by the honor code. He is remembered more for his respect for ritual than for his penchant for violence. In contrast to this figure, however, Reyfman points out that a great many duels found in Russian literature fail to live up to this heroic image. She observes that most famous fictional duels have tended to ignore dueling’s rules and to have done so in rather ignoble ways in which uncontrolled violence ran roughshod over the duel’s prescribed code of conduct. Reyfman wonders how these two different visions of the duel and duelists are to be reconciled. "Was there ever a Golden Age of the Russian duel," she asks, "a time when every noblemen adhered to the unwritten but universally respected honor code? And if there was, how common was such behavior?" (p. 3).

Answers to these questions are not easy to find for a variety of reasons. To begin with, Reyfman notes that there are no comprehensive studies of the history of Russian dueling. This is in part a reflection of the general neglect of the subject during most of the Soviet period. Equally importantly, it is a logical consequence of the difficulty of locating solid, verifiable evidence on dueling practices. As dueling was frequently an illegal and at best marginally tolerated affair, its practitioners tended not to advertise their activities too widely or to commit them to paper. When duels were discussed, their details were frequently kept vague or even distorted so as to throw off the authorities.

It is partially because the concrete historical facts of dueling are still so poorly known that the myth of the heroic duelist has enjoyed such longevity. With little published evidence to contradict his popular image, the Russian duelist of lore has faced few serious challengers. What is even more striking, the mythical duelist is not confined
to pulp fiction and mass culture, but is equally popular among leading scholars of Russian history. Reyfman tells the story of how in the 1960s Yuri Lotman liked to show off his dueling pistols to students and to take them to the grave of the duelist Konstantin Chernov in order to arouse in them respect for the idealism and admittedly futile heroism displayed by Russia's duelists (p. 283). It is one of the strengths of Reyfman's work that she does not fall for the seductive image of the duelist. She is instead more interested in the origins and history of this mythology, as well as how this mythology relates to the realities of the Russian duel. Reyfman writes that with her book she hopes to offer "a look that pries into cultural biases to see the duel more for what it was than for what Russians today perceive it to have been" (p. 8-9).

*Ritualized Violence Russian Style* is divided into two parts. The first part (chapters one through three) surveys the history of dueling in Imperial Russia; the second (chapters four through six) examines the place of dueling in Russian literature, particularly in the writings of Alexander Bestuzhev-Marlinsky and Feodor Dostoevsky. It was largely in the pages of nineteenth-century literary works that Russians learned of *point d'honneur* and of the precise methods and norms of dueling, and it was here that many Russians found models upon which to base their own behavior in regards to the duel. Writers helped to elaborate the notion of the duel as a safeguard of the individual and to elevate the duelist to his lofty place.

In her thoroughly researched historical overview -- based upon significant research into secondary and primary sources, including memoirs, correspondence, legal texts, belles-lettres, and periodicals -- Reyfman sketches an "impressionistic" picture (p. 11) that does a fine job of depicting two centuries of dueling practice in Russia. The central claim of her findings is that the duel, and the "*point d'honneur* mentality" (p. 10) upon which it was based, was adopted slowly and never completely by Russians over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The chief evidence for this claim is to be found in Russians' violation of the honor code that governed dueling, more specifically, the degree to which raw physical violence was tolerated as part of dueling practice.

Dueling was an attempt to limit and control violence, to place it within a known and mutually agreed upon set of norms and practices. In Russia, however, this proved particularly difficult to do. First of all, according to Reyfman, physical abuse in Russia had never carried with it the social stigma that it did in western Europe. If in Muscovite Russia being slapped and beaten did not necessarily bring dishonor to the injured party nor the expectation that he seek to avenge himself, it is not surprising that the honor code, based on the notion that to be physically or verbally violated required responding with a challenge, was slow to catch on.

The pervasiveness and acceptance of crude violence shaped the Russian duel in important ways. First of all, it meant that the ritualized violence of the duel existed within a context in which violence of a more spontaneous and unrestrained sort was still tolerated. This was quite different from western Europe where the duel had in part been used as a tool to curb this type of violence among the social elite. The continued acceptance of unchecked violence made it generally more difficult to initiate a duel in Russia. If in western Europe one did not actually have to strike another to initiate a duel but merely announce "Consider yourself slapped," (p. 108); in Russia a much higher threshold of abuse had to be crossed. Just as it takes two to waltz so too does it to duel, and Russians seeking a duel often had to go to extreme lengths to find a willing participant. This in turn helped to create the figure of the Russian *bretteur*: the devotee of dueling who, stymied by his compatriots unwillingness to acknowledge the code of
honor underlying the duel, was forced to inflict ever greater violence upon his victim in order to provoke him, eventually, to defend his honor. Reyfman recounts instances of Russians practically beating others to the ground in hopes of arousing them to duel (pp. 102-04).

Given the rough-and-tumble environment in which the duel was adopted, it is not surprising that much of this blind violence infiltrated the duel, making it a much bloodier, rowdier affair than in the rest of Europe. Reyfman writes how the 'Russian duel to a degree incorporated this 'national tradition,' so that fistfights and slaps in the face became unofficial parts of the dueling ritual" (p. 10). But according to Reyfman, the pronounced violence of the Russian duel was not simply a byproduct of violent national traditions or the incomplete adoption of the code of honor. Rather, and this brings us to her book's larger claims:

"[T]he Russian duel's remarkable openness to raw violence... manifested the Russian upper classes' struggle to safeguard their physical inviolability in the absence of reliable legal guarantees. Unable to secure the inviolability of their bodies, Russian duelists strove to replace the hierarchical -- and therefore humiliating --violences of corporal punishment with the equalizing violence of the duel. In so doing, they had to deal with a tradition that tolerated the punching and slapping of subordinates by their superiors. In an effort to destroy this tradition, Russian duelists appropriated it and incorporated it into dueling procedure. Once included in the dueling ritual and made reciprocal, a punishing gesture lost its capacity to impose hierarchical authority and became a means of promoting equality between the dueling parties. The rise of dueling also reflected the nobility's deep anxieties concerning the state's power over their bodies. The duel served as a strong -- although largely symbolic -- gesture to counter the state's violence against the individual" (p. 11).

Reyfman produces a good deal of evidence to support the idea that the Russian duel was an especially violent affair marked by a profusion of slaps, jabs, punches, smacks, shots, and slugs that exhibited little ritual and much violence. Yet is this ultimately a function of the uniqueness of the Russian duel or is it perhaps simply a reflection of how one defines a duel? Take for example the altercation between Petr Grinshtein and Vlas Klimovich and their respective parties that broke out after their carriages bumped into each other on a desolate Ukrainian road late one night in 1744. Both parties -- men and women, nobles and commoners -- had at each other; every available weapon was used, including cuss words, fists, sticks, guns, and swords. As Reyfman acknowledges, this fight bears little resemblance to a duel. Nevertheless, she tries to interpret it as if it were, largely given the lofty social status of Grinshtein, who had played a role in the coup of 1741 that put Elizabeth Petrovna on the throne. By examining the weapons they used and how they used them, Reyfman attempts to lay bare the symbolism of the fracas in order to discern the underlying logic of the code of honor. Yet, in the end she notes that there does not appear to have been any deeper layer meaning: "The semiotics of noble and vulgar, equalizing and punishing gestures seems to have been lost on Klimovich and Grinshtein" (p. 98-101).

Reyfman seems surprised by this. The combatants demonstrated a randomness and wantonness in their battle that calls to mind a barroom brawl. The warring parties made free and indiscriminate use of swords and sticks; they alternated between open-handed slaps and fisted punches in a way that shows little affinity with the rituals of the duel and a lack of concern for the varying symbolic weight of their weapons and actions. None of this should be too surprising, however. In the frenzy of an all-out fight, sticks and swords and hands are not signs carefully selected for their semiotic effect, but are instruments hurried-
ly taken up so as to lay one's opponent flat and motionless on the ground as quickly as possible.

Reyfman's treatment of this fight is significant in that it highlights a problem for any student of the duel: what is it that separates a random brawl from a duel? Is any fight between members of the social elite a duel, or must the altercation exhibit a well-defined set of features to qualify as such? Does moving from fists to swords necessarily imply the difference between a fight and a duel? Reyfman's answers to these questions would appear to be yes. She adopts a very loose definition of the duel, and so it is not terribly surprising that in her estimation part of what made the Russian duel Russian was its raw violence.

This having been said, it warrants stating that Reyfman does discuss several true duels that were quite messy affairs. The duel arose in western Europe as a mechanism for controlling spontaneous violence: men who sought to fight had to control their anger, to delay seeking satisfaction until a later date, and to agree to settle their disagreement in accordance with a specific set of rules that, among other things, replaced hand-to-hand combat with weapons that imposed physical separation on the fighters.

Much of this seems to have been lost on the Russians. The rules of dueling were frequently ignored, and the duel's role in separating the opponents was often completely lacking. In the rituals of the duel developed in western Europe one can see symptoms of the civilizing process of the European nobility examined by the sociologist Norbert Elias.[1] While Reyfman makes this general point about the duel's role in furthering a more civilized way to settle disputes in Europe, it is too bad she did not develop the subject further. One wonders what larger conclusions about the Russian nobility might be drawn given their apparent inability to submit themselves to the mechanisms of self-control that the duel demanded. Did this resistance to curbing one's violent tendencies manifest itself in other ways? What does the pronounced violence of the Russian duel say about the character of the Russian nobility as a whole?

A final question raised by Reyfman's book has to do with her idea that the duel served as tool for countering the state's control over noblemen's bodies. Reyfman's evidence in support of this is not entirely convincing. The specific examples of dueling she discusses suggest that dueling was much more about individual attempts at maintaining or asserting status among the Russian elite, that is, intra-group hostility, than about larger claims against Tsarist authority. The reasons for most duels appear to have been of a very personal, private, and often petty nature that did not possess any larger political meaning. A good example of this would be perhaps the most famous of all Russian duels, that between the Alexander Pushkin and Georges d'Anthes, fought over the latter's attentions to the poet's wife, Natalya. Duels fought for such reasons appear to have been more the norm than the exception to it.

Reyfman's discussion of Russian literature lends further support to this view. Bestuzhev-Marlinsky's Livonian tales are, she writes, "thinly disguised allusions to the early nineteenth-century Russian situation, especially to the antagonisms between the independent-minded nobility, whose members tried to assert their equality by means of dueling, and the nobility's powerful upper echelon, whose members tended to look down upon their politically weak fellow gentlemen" (p. 169). Furthermore, the details of Bestuzhev-Marlinsky's own life show how duels generally lacked larger political undercurrents. He fought duels (or came close to it) as a result of disagreements arising from several caricatures he drew of his fellow officers, from an impolite word uttered to a visiting German, and from "dancing." And legend has it that he was killed as a result of a duel with a jealous husband (pp. 162-163). Similar observations could be made about Dostoevsky's writings in which no duels "really occur" (p. 193) but the situations in which they are suggested typically
revolve around defending “a maiden's honor,” or around lost love, or quarrels between members of the old and new Russian nobility (pp. 211, 212, 253).

But even if one accepts her larger assertion about the duel's importance to the Russian nobility as a means to defy the power of the state, this does not make dueling in Russia different from dueling in other parts of Europe. In his study of dueling in France, for example, the historian Francois Billacois argues that one of the chief aspects of the duel there was the role it played in helping the nobility to assert its dignity and honor in ways independent of and at times in opposition to the authority of the monarch.[2] Reyfman refers to Billacois's work and acknowledges that his characterization of dueling in France is largely applicable to Russia (p. 41).

Although its larger assertions are not entirely convincing, *Ritualized Violence Russian Style* is a thoughtful, discerning, and intellectually sophisticated work. It provides a useful antidote to the myth of the honorable and heroic Russian duelist whose darker, seamier side has largely been overlooked. Indeed, upon putting down Reyfman's book one is left with little sense of the honorable or the heroic in dueling; rather, one cannot help but think of the utter pointlessness of most of this violence, of the tragic waste of human life the duel has wrought. So often duels were fought for no reason. Some men dueled simply for the experience of trying something new; for others it was nothing more than a way to combat boredom. Reyfman does not overlook these troubling aspects of the duel's history, and it is these unsettling facts, more than her broader claims, that are the book's strongest elements.

Notes


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