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RUS 3400

December 3, 2021

### The tumult and functional purpose of Russian Slavic culture

The dichotomy that exists in the Slavic soul, and truly the soul of Europe overall, carries great weight in the mind of a citizen, and influences how they act, how they perceive ideology, how they work, and how they raise their family. The notion that a Slavic mind contains two opposing halves that incessantly intermesh and war with each other is endemic in the subconscious of their nation. The civilisational staple of spiritualism, split between native pagan traditions [subverted though they may be] and the ways of Christianity, is recognized by most as one of the more poignant examples of this dichotomy. Figes' *Natasha's Dance* obsesses over the idea, perpetually cycling through the cleaved tropes of "serf and aristocrat", "Rus and Occident", "countryside and urbanity", "pagan and Abrahamic", with a lengthy et cetera to the number of topics encapsulated within the text. The societal niches the dichotomy inhabits are infinite in number, and the repercussions of its existence doubly so. In each case, one has to wonder which side of the split they must follow. "Which is best"? Which creates a more perfect society? Which is truer to my own nature? Can my divided nature sustain itself in a positive way?". My answer to these questions is not legitimate. I am an outsider. I have no Russian ancestry, and my knowledge on the cultural spirit of the nation comes from an American education in a post-Soviet space that obfuscates so many details of Russia's past. Even so, it is my established opinion that one side of the Russian dichotomy, the pagan/pre-Christian, is arguably the most

important and the most Russian, has diminished to the point of near-obsolation, and will be extinguished in the quickly changing contemporary era if nothing is done.

To comment on the utility of the Slavic spirit, lines must be first drawn in the sand. One must understand that the balance between the cultural halves of Russia, when simplified, teeters between mere division and stark polarity from issue to issue. As Christianity pervaded Russia and many native Slav traditions deteriorated, facets of the two cultures either juxtaposed, dominated their equals, or consolidated their differences through amalgamation. For instance, the morality-enforcing Slavic belief in an afterlife [driven by the ideal that all human spirits were inseparable, surviving before birth as well as after death] was generally well-corroborated in Christianity, and was a simple matter of passive cultural transition [Bilaniuk, p. 250]. Adversely, a large focus of the Northern Crusades in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was the transfer of land to Christian ownership and settlement of Slavic lands by Germanic migrants [Cartwright], violently assimilating many physical elements of pre-Christian Slavic culture.

Purely Slavic traditions are beset not only by Christian and Soviet influence, but also the ever-present force of urbanity. Presently, the entirety of Russian culture as documented in *Natasha's Dance* is itself being gradually subjugated by the modern era in a similar, though non-violent, fashion, flattening its edges and altering its traditions almost forcibly, Christianity included. Even Gogol's *Nevsky Prospect*, written in the early nineteenth century, remarks on the decadence and cultural dissonance brought on by St. Petersburg's vapid proclivity for materialism and the non-Slavic. Even so, the Church is still powerful in the roots of the nation, and is in no way in decline. Thankfully, one of the side-effects of Putin's grasp on Russia has been ample resistance to Westernization; however, one must take into account that technology

and cultural pressure in the modern era will make assimilation easier in the future, and if Russia wishes to maintain its cultural solidarity it will need to utilize what traditions and ideologies it has lost touch with.

On one hand, there is Christianity. With the fall of the Byzantine, Russia donned the helm of Orthodoxy, conquered the reach of her steppe, regimented her peoples, and erected a cultural paragon to rival those of Europe, Asia, and the Americas. “Interestingly enough, throughout the Orthodox world, and even in Russia, key rulers who adopted Christianity were often described as “new Constantines” or “successors to Constantine. Protecting the Church and the society it encapsulated thus became a way to sanctify the mission of the state and particularly steps taken in its defense.” [Gvosdev]. Since its arrival from Byzantium under Golden Horde rule, the Church has fronted Russian lifestyles at each turn. With it arose the concept of tsardom, as well as the germination of Moscow as the seat of Russia. Furthermore, Orthodoxy sustained pre-Soviet Russian culture even through the outspoken atheist movements of the Stalinist era.

In terms of preserving Russian heritage, it has been and will continue to be a bulwark against deterioration. It has functioned to preserve the structure of the family, promote morality in lifestyle, and bind communities in a cohesive cultural space. One could easily argue that Orthodoxy, as well as Catholicism, Protestantism, and their progeny, is a mild hybridization of Abrahamic religion with European paganism, and inherently provides a fine base for retrieval of what culture has been lost in its acceptance. However, during the twelve centuries Christianity has sustained in Russia, equally valuable Slavic customs were inexorably pushed aside, either by way of progressive obscurity or by being stamped out, creating vacuums in functional niches that, in the modern day, have been left unfilled, or filled by inadequate replacements. In the

pre-Soviet space, belief in *domovoy* served a function of promoting domestic stewardship, maintaining the integrity of homes and places of work and worship. Similarly, belief in wood sprites led to spiritually-motivated stewardship of nature. The loss of these beliefs over time has the negative function of devaluing discipline in domestic labor and social cohesion, as well as incurring a loss in respect for Russia's natural environment [arguably upended before the Soviet era, supported by claims from *The Bronze Horseman* insinuating Peter's hubris in challenging the Neva].

These pre-Christian beliefs, customs, and traditions that have been lost were developed through thousands of years of trial and error, tuned for the specific geography, lifestyle, and politics of the Slavic world. The replacement of these with Levantine religion [amended through Russian Orthodoxy though it might be], compounded with Russia's recurring Europhilic tendencies and the perspective-stifling effects of the Soviet era, makes the suppression of pure and unadulterated Slavic heritage all the more detrimental. What attempts the Kremlin has recently made to revive it, succinct and effective as they are, may not be enough. The *Mountain of Gems* series incorporates history with novelty, attempting to interest children in their heritage. Stories of Peter the Great, interspersed with entertaining episodes of valor, comedy, and intrigue are used as powerful tools in cultural reform. A generous amount of exaggeration and revision as placed in the stories presented, and the end result is powerful, effective propagandization of Russia's past. However, the average citizen will forget or belay these ideas by adulthood.

Very few Americans, exposed to similar attempts at instilling pride in one's heritage during childhood, draw cultural strength from the labor glorifying exploits of John Henry or Paul Bunyan, folk heroes who for decades provided the basis for the ideals of American pioneerism

and the Protestant work ethic. Though the American version of culture loss is far quicker, partially due to distancing from the European folk roots of its settlement, it could easily be said that Russia has been similarly distanced from its past by the civilisational waves of Mongolian, Imperial, Revolutionary, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Russia. This renders proportionately meager attempts at cultural nationalisation inert. So the same happens in Russia, and the once-constant instillment of functional ideology, once brought on in forms far more powerful than political propaganda, no longer has a niche to inhabit.

The modern world rejects the fairy tale, and parents no longer imprint upon their children the motivations of their forefathers: Slavic pagans, sacrificing livestock to river gods, were propelled naturally into producing food surplus by spiritual necessity [Encyclopedia Britannica]; ancestors were worshipped and feared, their bones tended to routinely, compelling awareness and reverence of history [Britannica]; enrichment of civilizational progress was arguably accelerated by consumption of fly agaric, its hallucinogenic and perspective-altering qualities propelling artistic Moscovites, tribal Siberians, and avant-garde Futurists alike to experiment in art, war, sexuality, and religious mysticism [Ioffe, pg 152-167]. Primitive and occasionally barbaric as these practices might appear outside their respective contexts, to translate their positive functions into a contemporary civilisation would be endlessly rewarding. To deliberately improve upon practical tradition so as to remove detriment and promote healthy lifestyles, as well as strengthen base Slavic culture, would be difficult.

Working the cosmetically archaic into the modern zeitgeist is no easy task, and to succeed in doing so such a movement would need to ensnare each dimension of Russian society. Family and domestic life, spiritual and religious community, and political and ideological orientation

would presumably need to be happily reorganized by current populations that fully understand and accept the benefits, consequences, and rhetoric of such doctrines. Ideally, this reorganization would take form in mimicries of cultural structures that existed in the pre-European reaches of Russia's past, blended with elements of traditional Orthodoxy [hopefully without any hint of conflicting heresy], and ingrained into Russian society without the ethical ambiguity and omission that occurred during the social engineering of the Soviet era. Otherwise, Orthodoxy may very well overlay an outward veneer over whatever concepts arise and ingrain themselves in the future of Russian culture, just as it laid a similar facade over Slavic paganism. In the introduction of *Natasha's Dance*, Figes describes the temperament of pre-Soviet, pre-Christian, pre-European Russia as "instinctive", yet also "elusive"[pg. xxx]. His interpretation that there is no concrete, authentic Russia imbeds itself fastly in whatever piece of Russian society one analyzes. The claim, being some contentious mixture of truth and falsehood, condemns most hopes of reviving what once was. Due to the geography of their nation and cultural receptiveness, it is difficult to picture the Russian Slav in any state other than in the throes of inner conflict. Perhaps the destiny, for lack of a word not dripping in rhetoric and dramatic insinuation, of the Russian Slav is to observe and labor to assemble. To mold all the valuable foreign ideology and tradition they deem worthy into their own shape. This cycle of cultural upheaval and the weaving of new veneers, the forging of ideological lenses, creates an immeasurable service on the world stage. To lose the centerpiece of these attitudes, the side of the oversimplified dichotomy which gives meaning to the other, warped though our perception of it may be, is nothing short of historical tragedy.

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