Cahiers du
MONDE RUSSE

Cahiers du monde russe

Russie - Empire russe - Union soviétique et États
indépendants

51/4 | 2010

**Sciences humaines et sociales en Russie à l'Âge
d'argent**

Irina Paert, Spiritual Elders

Nadieszda Kizenko

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/7460>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.7460

ISSN: 1777-5388

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 25 November 2010

Number of pages: 837-839

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2316-7

ISSN: 1252-6576

Electronic reference

Nadieszda Kizenko, "Irina Paert, Spiritual Elders", *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 51/4 | 2010, Online since 09 December 2011, connection on 03 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/7460> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.7460>

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REFERENCES

Irina PAERT, **Spiritual Elders. Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy**. DeKalb : Northern Illinois University Press, 2010, 286 p.

- 1 In less than 300 pages, this nuanced and admirably researched book covers a wealth of information on a rich and complex subject : the Russian tradition of spiritual elders and their role in society, or *starchestvo*. Through a skillful use of archives in Russia, Finland, Mordovia, and Tatarstan, and a close reading of published sources, Irina Paert provides both a comprehensive overview of spiritual elders and many fresh insights.
- 2 Many people – whether specialists in Orthodox Christianity or readers of *The Brothers Karamazov* – think they already know who Russian elders were and why they were important. The general outline is this : after years of prayer and seclusion, a charismatic monk opens the door of his cell and lets in the world. He is clairvoyant, clever, and charming, dispensing salty humor alongside spiritual insights and practical worldly advice. He attracts monastic disciples, flocks of lay visitors of every social class, and Russian writers and intellectuals like Kireevskii, Dostoevskii, and Tolstoi, who enjoy his conversation and depict him in their works. He is, in short, the friendly and funny face of Orthodoxy, the antithesis of its other “men in black” – the distant bishop and the beleaguered, too familiar parish priest.
- 3 This is the stereotype. It is not inaccurate. It could in fact serve as the biography of more than a few elders, including Leonid, Makarii, and Amvrosii of Optino. It is to Paert’s great credit that she goes beyond the usual outline to tell a story that is far more interesting. *Spiritual Elders* broadens the parameters of the *starets* narrative in methodology, chronology, and scope. Approaching tradition as collective memory allows Paert to ask why certain traditions – like spiritual eldership – are sometimes recovered from obscurity, revived, and indeed “invented.” Russian elders did indeed see themselves not

only as the recipients of the Eastern Christian tradition, but also as participants in its ongoing creative renewal, which is Paert's story.

- 4 Paert begins by tracing the evolution of *starchestvo* from the early Christian desert monastic communities throughout medieval Byzantium and the Latin West. She then examines how eldership grew among Eastern Orthodox Slavs, and how it was revived in the eighteenth century by the Kollyvades movement in Greece. Central to her story is the figure of Paisii Velichkovskii, who left a theological seminary in Kiev in 1737 to seek authentic spirituality in monastery after monastery. The turning point for him came with a stay at the St. Elisha skete on Mount Athos. In 1763, he left for Moldavia, where he pursued his chief activities: hesychastic prayer and the discovery and translation of Greek patristic texts.
- 5 Several elements of Paisii's story figure as leitmotifs in *Spiritual Elders*. One is how central to the modern Orthodox tradition the then forgotten *Philokalia* (*Dobrotoliubie*) has become: in other words, the modern phenomenon of spiritual elders rests as much on texts as it does on charismatic individuals. This emphasis on shared texts as the foundation of spiritual eldership continued in the later nineteenth century and the twentieth. One is also struck by the wide range of people who worked on their translation. Rather than being something done by monks for other monks, the translation of the *Philokalia* became the joint project of monasteries and educated laypeople, including Ivan and Natalia Kireevskii. Yet another key theme is the role of living links to the hesychastic prayer practices outlined in the *Philokalia*. Paisii did not attract sixty-four disciples from Athos, and many more afterwards, because he was a talented translator: he attracted them because he sought to put into practice the *Philokalia*'s contents. These key elements in the spiritual elder phenomenon – texts, close disciples, and lay supporters – seem nearly as important as the elders themselves.
- 6 Paert examines spiritual elders throughout different stages in Russian history, starting with the reforms of Peter I. Her discussion of elders in the sharply changed conditions after 1917 – and after perestroika – is particularly interesting. *Starchestvo* then became an even more important aspect of monastic life than it had before; it came to be used by ever more parish priests; and its charismatic authority extended to ever more women. Paert's inclusion of this chapter is part of a recent trend in the scholarship of religion in Russia, where studies of phenomena as varied as saints' cults, relics, icons, monasteries, confession, and Mary, cover both sides of the previously immutable 1917 divide.
- 7 Paert takes on a number of issues that previous works on spiritual elders have neglected. Central here are Weber and his theories of charisma. The elders Paert discusses did not derive their authority from their ordination or any other official recognition: their authority was personal, not institutional. Although elders directed people spiritually, Paert repeatedly stresses that this was distinct from sacramental confession. As loci of sacred power, elders had more in common with icons and relics than they did with ordained clerics. But, Paert cautions, elders should not be understood as being somehow opposed to the institutional church, or the church establishment. One of the most interesting parts of her story, in fact, is how much effort sympathetic bishops (who were, after all, monks) like Gavriil (Petrov), Dosifei (Il'in), Platon (Levshin), and Filaret (Drozdov) invested in the revival of monasticism. Bishop Ignatii (Brianchaninov) himself helped to reintroduce early and Byzantine ascetic writers to the reading public. Another unexpected discovery is the close relation of many elders with Old Belief. Exchanges between Orthodox monasticism and Old Belief continued throughout the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: both found inspiration in the same sources of ascetic literature. Yet another surprise is Paert's analysis of the elders' social origins. One might expect them to come from the clergy (Russian Orthodox priests, of course, were married and had children). However, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the parish clergy are absent among elders. Instead, the two social groups of origin were the nobility and the merchants: Paert explains why in a fascinating discussion.

- 8 Particularly striking, however, is the collaboration of men and women in the elder phenomenon. Male elders helped found and foster women's religious communities – indeed, in the eighteenth century, the majority of Russian women's monastic communities emerged thanks to the spiritual elders' support. In the nineteenth century, elders continued to be active in the founding of new (and almost invariably female) religious communities. Similarly, women's communities helped male elders become ever more renowned, partly through their compilations of biographies of famous elders and partly because of the growth of another literary genre they helped to create: religious letter-writing. This genre, familiar in the Latin West, experienced a boom in Russia from the early nineteenth century onwards. Elders favored an interior spiritual life and an intimate style of religious communication; they spread their teaching through conversation or correspondence (rather than sermons). Emblematic in this respect are Georgii (Mashurin), the Recluse of Zadonsk, and Bishop Feofan (Govorov) the Recluse, who shut the doors to their cells and communicated with the world only by letter. Both nuns and educated laywomen found the epistolary genre, like other forms of "life-writing," particularly congenial.
- 9 Paert, however, does not discuss female elders (*staritsy*) solely in the context of their relation to male elders, but also in the diversity of religious models women had to choose from. One variant was that of Mother Arseniia (Serebriakova) (b. 1832). Arseniia, a noblewoman whose spiritual guide was an older, slightly brutish, fellow nun who was the daughter of a parish priest, became a spiritual guide and abbess. Her methods of leadership were unusually egalitarian and communal. Another spiritual model was that of the holy fool. Paert's example here is Pelagiia (b. 1809) of the Diveevo community, whose behavior did not exactly correspond to normal notions of decency, let alone piety: she refused to confess or take communion and wore rugs instead of clothing; "while Pelagiia spent most of her day in a ditch full of manure, when she was not violently breaking windows and killing cats she continued to pray and carry out ascetic exploits" (123). It is perhaps fortunate that she did not inspire many disciples.
- 10 In sum, like its subject, this elegantly written book will engage everyone who seeks a better understanding of religion in Russia – and of spiritual life itself.