

Elena Smilianskaia. 2016. *Magicians, Blasphemers, and Heretics in the Net of Russian Interrogation in the 18th Century (Volshebnyki, bogokhul'niki, eretiki v setiakh syska XVIII veka)*. Moscow: Lomonosov (in Russian). — 384 pages.

Elena Borisovna Smilianskaia's monograph, which was published in 2016 by the publishing house Lomonosov, constitutes an expansion and supplementation of her previous book (Smilianskaia 2003). As the author notes in the introduction, the second edition of the book takes into account the newest publications on the topic. Unfortunately, this 2016 edition has lost supplements that were highly valuable in terms of scholarly significance — a list of archival documents from 1700–1801 “about witchcraft, blasphemy, sacrilege, heresy, and ‘superstition’” (30 pages), a list of literature and sources (60 pages), and an alphabetical index. Footnotes were exchanged for endnotes with continuous numeration and every odd page is supplemented with illustrations in the margins. All of this made working with the text significantly more difficult, but it did not overshadow its contents.

The book is devoted to the religiosity of Orthodox inhabitants of Russia in the eighteenth century, which it investigates strictly by means of judicial-inquisitorial documents that contain evidence about “spiritual crimes” of that time. Sources for these materials are: the Secret Chancellery, the Se-

cret Expedition (f. 7), the Senate (f. 248), the Preobrazhenskii Prikaz (f. 371), the Investigations Department (f. 372), the Moscow Kontora of the Synod (f. 1183), documents of the Cabinet of Peter I (f. 9), the Cabinet of Catherine (f. 10), and the Spiritual Department (f. 18), which are preserved in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA), and the archive of the Synod (f. 796), in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), and also investigative documents from the regional archives of the Vologda, Kursk, Novgorod, Sverdlovsk, Tver, Tyumen, and Yaroslavl oblasts.

The researcher divided the archival materials she collected into three large sections: “Magicians,” “Blasphemers and the Sacrilegious,” and “Heretics.” A solid historiography precedes each of the three parts of the book. The first part of the book is dedicated to the investigation of “magical belief” as a living reality not just in medieval, but also in modern European culture. Moreover, as the author shows, belief of this type was characteristic not only of the grassroots folk culture, the culture of the “common folk,” but also of the high culture of educated city dwellers (including those who took part in the creation of

the laws of the Russian Empire). Individual cases, for example the history of Pyotr Saltykov (c. 1724–post 1796), the story of Katerina Ivanova (1764), and others, are collected here as well.

Each such history contains not just description of historical materials, quotations from sources that have been adapted for the reader, and the conclusions of the author, but also, on the margins, a fairly extensive reconstruction of fragments of the inner and outer world of people of the eighteenth century.

For instance, in the first part of the book we encounter a story about lots, which were magical instruments for divination. “Fortune telling with lots,” the author writes, “is one of the simplest means of predicting the future, rarely requiring recourse to either fortune-telling books or to a complex toolkit. Lots cut out of bread could replace wooden ones; pits from black prunes, and also beans or even pieces of radish were used in their place. Sometimes in the most crucial life situations, people cast lots or even more simply, two slivers of wood. Thus the peasant girls Efim’ia and Matrena, who could not share the beloved house serf Andrei, told fortunes with kindling” (51–52). The author verbally creates a veritable museum exhibit, which due to the author’s masterful command of words receives scope and depth.

In another place the author quotes the *Trebnik* (Service Book) of 1720, which directed clergymen to deny communion to sorcerers for twenty years, and deny communion for six years to those who carry charms to protect livestock magically or to cast spells. “Tell me, child, did you not practice magic, or while practicing sorcery, did you pour wax or tin? Did you not bring a sorcerer into your home, who took off inflicted harm, or would you take it off yourself; or did you yourself not create sorcery to harm someone; did you not hex animals from the wolves, or did you not spell a man or woman, or another one in bind of feebleness? Did you not carry magic herbs?” (96).

In yet another fragment in the third chapter, we learn that “the cross acquired a special place in the magical rite, while not losing its semantic meaning, which is evidence that the individual belongs to Christianity.” E. B. Smilianskaia writes that “magical instruments, such as wax, or a little root were usually ‘attached’ to the cross to strengthen their effect. . . . Wax, stuck to the cross, was one of the more widespread charms against the ‘evil eye’ or a talisman for obtaining mercy” (99). They even pronounced incantations over the cross for luck.

In the pages of the book not just objects come to life, but also people — peasants, nobles, priests, soldiers, and townspeople. We get to

know their mode of speech, names, and nicknames. We see how and in what they believed, how they prayed. We know how much they paid for magical services: in the beginning of the eighteenth century “magical roots for hexing the landowner” cost fifty kopecks, enchanted salt four kopecks, and “magic” wax ten kopecks. Treatment “with incantation” by the village sorcerer cost one kopeck per session, but sometimes sorcerers would treat for a “cup of wine,” a “hat or cap,” and even for free. “On account of this, magic in the eighteenth century proved to be a profitable fraud,” writes Smilianskaia. “It seems that the fact that sorcerers began to be sought out more frequently at the market and that their services at times demanded a considerable sum can also testify to this” (89–90). In speaking of sorcery by bearers of Christian culture, it is difficult to avoid discussion of “dual faith.” Elena Borisovna, however, proposes another approach to the problem. “The magical and the Christian,” she writes, “did not even enter into conflict; instead they frequently complemented each other in the religious life of an Orthodox person of the eighteenth century. If Christian prayers, pilgrimages, or turning to the priest did not help in the fulfillment of one’s desires, the sufferer had no difficulty turning to magical words, talismans, or the help of a magician. Conversely, the performance of magical rituals

did not hinder many from abiding in the bosom of the church” (101).

Smilianskaia describes the characteristics of “folk belief,” the most important of which is the lack of consistency, an organic cohesiveness of religious conception. “The distinctive weaving together of magical, pagan belief and Christianity, which are contradictory in their essence,” she writes, “often proves to be persistent and affixes its imprint on the foundational conceptions of good and evil, of the power of God and Satan, and of the interrelationship of the earthly and otherworldly in traditional consciousness” (282–83).

In another place the author writes, “Documents from investigations of witchcraft show that in the religious viewpoint of all the participants of the process — the accused, witnesses, investigators, and judges — “opposite systems” — religion and magic, Christian feeling and magical superstition — were joined in indissoluble unity” (94).

An undoubted merit of the author is an excellent command not just of historiography and the materials of the Russian archives, but also a knowledge of the Western European context. The book cites examples of typical testimonies of the convicted, which were preserved in the materials of Western European “witch trials” from the end of the fifteenth to the end of the seventeenth centuries. The author lays out the following narra-

tive arc: meeting with a devil, the physical and spiritual transfer of self to the devil, travel to a witches' sabbath by magical means, supplication to the devil at a witches' sabbath, the return home by supernatural means, and the committing of crimes with the help of the devil against people, their property, community, or religion. Smilianskaia writes that, "such uniformity of plot, produced in various parts of Europe over two centuries, leads researchers to the idea that the logical outline of 'high theology' prevailed in the course of the investigation, compelling judges to secure the needed testimony, to impose their logic of explanations onto the sequence and connections of events" (65).¹

Not just an analysis of foreign materials is important here, but also the conclusions toward which the author leads the reader about the place of Russia among other European states. Much of what we see in fifteenth- to seventeenth-century Europe allows us to understand the processes that were occurring in Russia in the first half of the eighteenth century. Thus, in the first part of the book the case of young peasant women from Yaroslavl province who are

*klikushi*² is introduced. In 1764 during a fit, these women called out the name of their neighbor, Katerina Ivanovna, who had allegedly "corrupted" them. The relatives of the *klikushi* not only beat Katerina, but also gave her over to the provincial chancellery, where she told in detail how, "having obtained an herb, she summoned two devils to herself and sent them to the Moloksha River to pull out stones" and how "having stirred that herb in water with her finger, gave the water [to the *klikusha*] to drink, and having removed the herb from the water, placed it in a chink in the hut" and that "she did this damage out of spite as testified in the interrogation" (66). Katerina Ivanovna's interrogation is given in full in the book on pages 67–73. "The case of Katerina Ivanova," writes Smilianskaia, "corresponds in a surprising manner with the charges described in Western European historical anthropological literature of English women who were accused with witchcraft in the sixteenth through seventeenth centuries" (67).

Analyzing Russian sorcery trials, Smilianskaia proposes to delineate the distinctive acts of a "ritual drama": the prologue (the "realization by a person that he cannot receive help in his trouble through permitted means"); the

1. We also see the influence of investigatory rhetoric in Russian materials, for example, in the statements of those arrested in the interrogations of the *Khristovery* in 1733. For more, see Sergazina 2017, 113–30.

2. *Klikushi* — literally "shriekers," women of all classes thought to be possessed by demons in eighteenth-century Russia — Ed.

beginning of the story (“meeting with a magician” or the search for a sorcerer and an intermediary); the climax of the drama (“when, usually in solitude, the sorcerer completes the transformation of salt, wax, dry herbs, or water [more rarely something different] into a magical object, which possesses the given magical power”); the denouement (success or failure, but more often the suspicions of those nearby, rumors, denunciations, arrests, and torture). Moreover she proposes viewing the very text of the spell or incantation “not just as a demonic language, understood above all by otherworldly powers who are summoned or banished in ritual action, but also as its own kind of narrative, which carries information about the supernatural” (109). The data on the quantity and dynamics of sorcery trials in the eighteenth century are interesting. E. B. Smilianskaia’s examination of the archival material allows her to speak with certainty about twenty-three witchcraft trials between 1700 and 1720, eighty trials between 1721 and 1740, ninety-seven trials between 1741 and 1760, twenty-two trials between 1761 and 1780, and eighteen trials between 1781 and 1801. We see that the peak occurs during the time of Elizabeth.

The second part of the book addresses the profanation of the sacred (the inverse of reverence for the sacred [204]), for instance the

disrespect for and desecration of sacred objects and shrines, and as well as sacrilegious and pseudo-sacrilegious actions; that is those things that are customarily called blasphemy. Analyzing the extensive archival material, Smilianskaia reviews the tradition of Soviet historiography and writes: “It is hardly possible to agree with the conclusions expressed by Soviet researchers of the 1950s and 1960s that the investigative cases into the desecration of saints and shrines give evidence for an indifferent and outright negative attitude to religion or for the origin of atheism in Russia. [. . .] An overwhelming majority of ‘blasphemers’ who are known to us did not identify themselves with anti-church and anti-Orthodox views. Rather, several had reputations as exemplary parishioners” (181).

On the basis of 133 trials for “blasphemy,” E. B. Smilianskaia comes to the conclusion that in eighteenth-century Russia, the majority of the crimes of blasphemers “consisted of drunken swearing or cursing in a fit of passion, during which the swearing included mentions of the saints, the church, the cross, the Almighty, and the Mother of God” (178). Here it is necessary to add reservations about the divine liturgy, vandalism, the theft of icons, and criticism of church songs or services.

“Our materials about blasphemous swearing in addressing the

saints and the Almighty,” writes the author, “to a certain degree confirm the opinion, which has been stated in literature, of the absence of a spiritual-deferential attitude to saints and shrines in everyday consciousness. [. . .] The expression of the sacred beyond the confines of a ‘pure’ space (such as prayer texts, literary texts, or the space of the church) and the mentioning of holy images ‘in vain,’ ‘simplifies’ and coarsens it. Then in that ‘base’ sphere, the sacred turns into its opposite: ‘laughable’ or blasphemous, ‘fleshly’ or ‘black,’ demonic” (189–90).

The third part of the book is dedicated to religious free-thinking and heterodoxy as a reaction “to folk piety and the folk reverence for Christian sacred objects, which had taken the place of worship of pagan idols and charms in the medieval mass consciousness.” “The significance for our national history of reformational freethinking in the eighteenth century,” writes Smilianskaia, “can be explained not just by the number of its adherents. ‘Heretics’ attempted to comprehend the contents of Christian dogma, including through the rejection of external rituals in favor of the search for ‘spirit and truth,’ and obviously they were in larger number than it is possible to judge by reports of open opposition to the church. [. . .] It is also clear that

given the insignificant number of Russian ‘iconoclasts’ or ‘heretics,’ the higher powers (both church and secular) were not inclined to serve Westernism by showing tolerance to those of their own subjects who had been contaminated with reformation criticism. They tolerated and invited Westerners of other creeds, but punished and tortured their own, both physically and spiritually” (279–80).

With all its depth of conception and the consistency of its exposition of historical materials, principally archival, E. B. Smilianskaia’s book may be interesting not just to historians, philologists, anthropologists, and religious scholars, but also to all who are interested in our national history. It is interesting even, perhaps, to those who wish to find practical applications for the magical recipes laid out in the book.

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References

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