

The Bathhouse at Midnight: Magic in Russia. By W. F. RYAN. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. Pp. 504, 19 black-and-white plates. \$71.50 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

“Where should one begin to learn to be a *koldun* [sorcerer]?”
 “Anywhere you like. But best is a bathhouse at midnight.”

Hence the title of W. F. Ryan’s impressive survey of popular and folk magic across the broad expanses, both geographical and historical, of Great Russia. “The communal village bathhouse and midnight,” Ryan writes in the second chapter, on popular magic, “represent the conditions *par excellence* for magic and divination in Russia” [p. 50]. Also densely compacted in this single event—the bathhouse *at* midnight—is a summary of the magico-religious side of Russian folk life as a syncretism of thoroughly Slavic traditions and common (Indo-)European or even universal beliefs. For locating communal bathing facilities at the edge of an agrarian village is an ancient Slavic custom that persists into modern times, while the notion of midnight as a significant point within a dangerous diurnal transitional period is common in many areas of the world.

Ryan’s selection of this image—which itself would be extremely evocative of sorcery and danger for almost any Russian, even a contemporary urbanite—succinctly reveals the intention of the book: to describe the enormous and fertile range of uniquely Russian beliefs, locales, and objects as they are involved in what one would conveniently call “magic,” and to use that description to provide a view of Russia and the Russians that is not accessible from any other source.

This is an important task, and an ambitious one. Starting with his 1969 dissertation on Old Russian astrology, Ryan, chief librarian at University of London’s Warburg Institute, has spent a career collecting an enormous amount of data, primarily from secondary sources, about what might be termed the occult and esoteric aspects of Russian culture. But whereas in the West the term *magic* is often associated with such learned traditions and movements as alchemy, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, theosophy, and the like, in Russia these urban traditions were borrowed late and pale in comparison to the distribution of beliefs in magic and sorcery at the village level. The reasons for this difference are complex and are touched upon by Ryan in the outline history of magic and Russia that leads off the book. Two major factors accounting for the difference seem to be variances in the distribution of literacy and church history. While ecclesiastical leaders in both Russia and Western Europe from the very beginning condemned as heretical any involvement with sorcery or magical practices, Orthodox Russia did not undergo the particular historical and religious developments leading to the Enlightenment, so in a sense magic there was never elevated to the same learned or courtly status as in the West—even after Catherine the Great!

Ryan’s organizational approach to this book is clearly that of a librarian and historian rather than an anthropologist or ethnographer. The data are arranged according to categories of magical practices and materials and practitioners, there being chapters with such headings as “Popular Magic,” “Wizards and Witches,” “Talismans and Amulets,” “Spells, Curses and Magic Prayers.” For the Western scholar or student without access to the wide array of resources, mostly in Russian

and sometimes of questionable methodology, such an arrangement is suitable, useful, and convenient. Confessing frustration with the frequent lack of either reliable ethnographic data or consistent scholarship in the area of magic and witchcraft in Russia, Ryan tends to draw his data from wherever he finds it. Consequently, he relies too heavily for my taste on Vladimir Dal', a lexicographer and ethnographer of the late nineteenth century, and is willing to use, albeit with caution, folkloric evidence in the literary works of later Russian writers such as Pushkin, Gogol, or Goncharov. Certainly this literary evidence is not without its value, but I wonder whether Ryan is perhaps influenced too much by the Russian definition of folklore, according to which literary materials can be considered primary data.¹

As a work of scholarship, *The Bathhouse at Midnight* is a tour de force. The bibliography alone serves as the best general list of materials on Russian magic anywhere, including Russia. While it is true that for the Russian-reading nonspecialist a number of basic works have become available once again in recent years, the difficulty of navigating the bibliography of such arcane materials is daunting. Contemporary Russian reprint houses have published standard prerevolutionary works on folklore and magic in the past decade: easily found in any bookstore now are works by the major Russian ethnographers (for lack of a better term), such as Dal', Zabylin, Afanas'ev, Zelenin, and Maksimov. Books on spells (*zago-vory*) and curses (*zaklinanija*), such as those by Eleonskaia, Maikova, and Poznanskii, are also readily available. In English, there are just a few useful books available, such as those by Ivanits, Balzer, Zguta, and others. But these books only scratch the surface, and for the reader without specific knowledge of the historical, especially political, context surrounding the Russian research, it is often difficult to know when to take the proverbial grain of salt. Ryan helps solve that problem.

What I liked best about Ryan's survey is that it succeeds in conveying the feeling that Russians have regarding wizards, sorcerers, witches, and neighborhood magic. It is often hard for people in the West to get past a conception of magic as satanic and perverse and controlled by great Oz- or Crowley-like magicians. In Russia, and indeed in most of the smaller Slavic East European countries, until the processes of urbanization and late Stalinist Communism in the 1950s, magic was seemingly not so compartmentalized but, rather, was an aspect of agrarian communal life. What Ryan's book demonstrates without any doubt is how extensive magical beliefs in Russia were, and perhaps still are.

For a specialist, perhaps the greatest value of Ryan's work beyond the bibliography is his attention to terminology. Because magical beliefs in Russia have been derived from several sources, including Byzantium at one extreme and pre-Christian shamanism at another, the Slavic nomenclature of magicians and magical practices is quite diverse, and it traditionally requires a good deal of discussion as to whom one is talking about before any broader argument can proceed. Here in one volume is a comprehensive listing of all the different terms for magic, spells, practitioners, and the like.

¹ Such a methodological approach can have serious consequences: reams have been dedicated to a discussion of the magical passages in *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*, which many now believe to be a hoax.

Different organizing principles for the materials presented in *Bathhouse* would naturally yield different insights. There is so much data here that the approach of including virtually everything pertaining to “wizards and sorcerers,” say, under that rubric tends to obscure some of the underlying links and cultural patterns and systems that might be at work. There is virtually no discussion of ritual, or of such dichotomous concepts as pure/impure, which are pervasive and extremely useful for understanding Russian folklore in general. Burial rituals, for example, provide information about the beliefs in the nature of the body and soul, on which magic presumably acts. Ryan thus notes several prohibitions about burying sorcerers without discussing how those taboos fit into a larger scheme of beliefs about the afterlife. Looking at the data within a ritual context and isolating the evidence within narrower temporal and geographical boundaries is outside the scope of this book but would be of more use to someone wishing to understand the structural aspects of Russian magic.

Russian magical belief, which is a pervasive aspect of Russia’s folklore and still a visible part of the social fabric of the largest country (geographically speaking) on the planet, has for almost a century remained inaccessible to all but a handful of scholars outside Russia and, alas, the Soviet Union. Ryan’s master work now provides a thorough, well-documented survey of an extremely rich and fascinating area and constitutes an invitation to any serious student of magic and its practice to consider entering this previously uncharted territory.

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The Shadows and Lights of Waco: Millennialism Today. By JAMES D. FAUBION. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001. Pp. xvii+242. \$55.00 (cloth); \$22.50 (paper).

For many, including most news reporters, law enforcement officials, anti-“cult” activists, and some scholars, the tangle of events now conveniently summarized as “Waco” centered on David Koresh, the prophet and spiritual leader of an Adventist sect known as the Branch Davidians, who died along with seventy-three of his students in the fiery climax of a fifty-one-day standoff with federal agents on April 19, 1993. In various representations Koresh himself has become the paradigm of the pathological cult leader, a cautionary example of the irresistible power of millennialist religious groups. More recently, scholars such as Jayne Docherty in *Learning Lessons from Waco* (Syracuse University Press, 2001), John Hall in *Apocalypse Observed* (Routledge, 2000), and Catherine Wessinger in *How the Millennium Comes Violently* (Seven Bridges, 2000) have offered more sophisticated analyses of the nature of the Branch Davidian community, David Koresh’s role within it, and its complex interactions with both its parent tradition, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and its cultural opponents. In part because the spectacular near extinction of the Branch Davidians in the April 19 fire generated so much public and official scrutiny, the small sect that never claimed more than a few hundred members now offers historians of religion a rich array of data