Russian Folk Belief

Linda J. Ivanits

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Linda J. Ivanits

With a foreword by Felix J. Oinas

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For Laci
(and Pioci, too!)

European Russia before the Revolution

Map by Laszlo Ivanits

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Foreword

Folk beliefs have aroused considerable interest in Russia, among folklorists and laymen alike. This interest first manifested itself in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with reports in the ethnographic journals *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* and *Zhivaia starina*, etc., and book-size surveys by Anichkov, Maksimov, Zelenin, and others. In the harsh years of Stalinism interest in folk belief subsided, but it revived in the second half of the century, resulting in significant studies by Tokarev and Pomerantseva. Unfortunately, the work done in Russia has been virtually inaccessible in the West, primarily because of language difficulties. Only Felix Haase's *Volksglaube und Brauchtum der Ostslaven* (1939) has served as the gateway to Russian mythology. The readers of English will therefore undoubtedly welcome the publication of Professor Linda J. Ivanits's thorough survey of Russian folk beliefs.

Although Russia has just celebrated the millennium of her Christianization, pagan beliefs remained so deeply imbedded among the population that the Christian church could hardly gain a foothold. This is to a considerable degree due to the low standing and ineffectiveness of the teachers of Christianity—the village clergy. The Russian clergy was poorly educated[1] and suffered under severe social and economic plight. Donald W. Treadgold characterized the clergy as "a poverty-stricken group; many of its members were notorious for drunkenness and loose living, were objects of scorn or amusement to the villagers rather than respect, and were locked in an unending battle for an extra kopeck

or two with their parishioners, fellow clergy and the state."[2]

Although church dignitaries fought against heathen practices with proclamations and encyclicals, the word did not reach the average village priest or the people. The Christian veneer was not deep enough to cover the underlying paganism. Those scholars who stress paganism as prevailing among the Russians up to the end of the last century seem to come closer to the truth than the idealists who insist on the people's religious essence.

The preservation of the ancient beliefs in Russia until the most recent times has made their extensive recording possible. Professor Ivanits has assiduously used the collections and studies published in Russia and abroad. Her *Russian Folk Belief* covers Russian paganism, Christian personages, the devil, house and nature spirits, and sorcery. The second part of the work contains her translations of a body of folk narratives about the supernatural.

As for Russian paganism, the individual divinities mentioned in the Primary Chronicle as belonging to the pagan pantheon set up by Prince Vladimir in Kiev in 980 have been by and large clarified by scholars (Roman Jakobson and others). Perun, Volos (omitted from the list of gods), Mokosh, and Dazhbog are obviously genuine Slavic gods, whereas the rest—Stribog, Khors, Svarog, and Simargl—represent the Iranian element in the ancient Slavic pantheon. However, there are still numerous problems which remain at the stage of hypothesis. Such are, for instance, the arrangement of gods in the Indo-European social and religious system, with which Ivanov and Toporov have toiled, and Rybakov's attempt to accommodate the chronicle gods plus several additional ones found in medieval sources (Rod, Iarilo, Lada, etc.) in a skeletal yearly calendar for the ancient Eastern Slavs.

The Christian personages and saints were colored by Russian popular ideas. St. Nicholas was the great favorite of the people because of his democracy, whereas St. George was favored by the upper classes. On the other end of the ladder was Cassian, considered a harmful, almost demonic saint.

The devil (*chert*, *bes*) as the incarnation of evil was able to cause any harm imaginable. He lived everywhere and could change his shape at will, appearing as a human, a black cat, black dog, pig, magpie, etc., and even as a ball of thread or a pile of hay. The devil also changed his shape in folklore according to the genre, assuming different guises in creation myths, legends, folktales, fabulates, and memorates.

A host of spirits inhabited the peasant's immediate neighborhood. The house spirit, *domovoi*, was the benevolent protector of the family.

Though occasionally capricious, it often performed tasks for the forgetful master and was free of demonic traits; only at the end of the nineteenth century did its image acquire some devilish traits here and there. The apprehension and fear that the people felt for forests and bodies of water were carried over to their supposed rulers—the forest and water spirits (*leshii* and *vodianoi*, respectively). As beings belonging to the out-group and inhabiting a hostile environment, they represented malevolent forces for the peasants. Both of them, but especially the water spirit, became identified with the devil. The field spirit (*polevoi*), residing closer to home, was least feared. *Rusalka*, the airy female of heterogeneous origin, was the most colorful of the spirits and gave wings to the fantasy of poets and writers.[3]

The influence of sorcery on the psyche of the Russian peasant was overwhelming, as Professor Ivanits demonstrates in the lengthy chapters devoted to it. If something went wrong in a family, be it crop failure, drought, family discord, infertility, epidemics, or illness—it was attributed to sorcerers and witches; likewise "spoiling" (*porcha*), *klikushestvo*, damage to livestock, etc. Sorcery was feared not only by the peasants, but also by the other classes—the clergy, the nobility, and even the household of the tsar. Fear for the tsar was especially strong because of the possible threat to the political order.

Punishment of witches and sorcerers in Russia did not reach the proportions it did in Western Europe. The number of instances was smaller and the punishments somewhat milder. Besides torture and burning at the stake, less harsh punishments such as imprisonment, exile, and confinement to a monastery were also used in Russia. In the eyes of the law, the so-called wise people (*znakhari*), who worked for the benefit of people, were not distinguished from witches and sorcerers.

Professor Ivanits's work is descriptive. It does not indulge in comparisons (except for referring occasionally to the Ukraine and the Western Slavs), nor in theories. The abundant material presented will certainly prove very useful for anyone interested in Russian folk beliefs.

FELIX J. OINAS
Indiana University

Notes

1. Characteristic is the admonition of a theological seminary teacher to his students, the future priests: "Everyone who likes geometry is repulsive to God; it is a sin to study astronomy and read Hellenic books. If you use your own mind in trying to

understand things, you are likely to commit grave errors. . . If you are asked whether you know philosophy, answer in the following way: I am not curious of Hellenic impudences, I do not read books written by astronomers and rhetoricians. I do not keep company with clever thinkers." (V. O. Kliuchevskii, *Kurs russkoi istorii* [1906], Moscow, 1937. ACLS reprints, 1948. vol. 3, p. 318; quoted by Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* [Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987], p. 106.)

2. Donald W. Treadgold, "The Peasant and Religion," *The Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, ed. Wayne S. Vucinich (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1968), pp. 100-101.

3. It is possible that the church also played a role in the diabolization of the spirits because of the mixup of the Christian idea of the devil and popular ideas of the forest, water, and house spirits. The latter could have been conceived as different manifestations of one evil spirit, the devil. (P. G. Bogatyrev, *Voprosy teorii narodnogo iskusstva* [Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971], p. 283.)

Preface

This project began as a study of folklore in the writings of Dostoevsky. While gathering materials on folk belief, I was struck by the absence of information in English, and it occurred to me that a general survey of this subject for those who cannot read Russian might be a good idea. Accordingly, this is not a highly specialized study. Nor is it a study of folk belief and literature, much as this subject coincides with my own interests and training. It does provide a background for such a study and may therefore be of interest to students of Russian literature who, like me, see folk beliefs and superstitions peeking from every page of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and other great Russian classics.

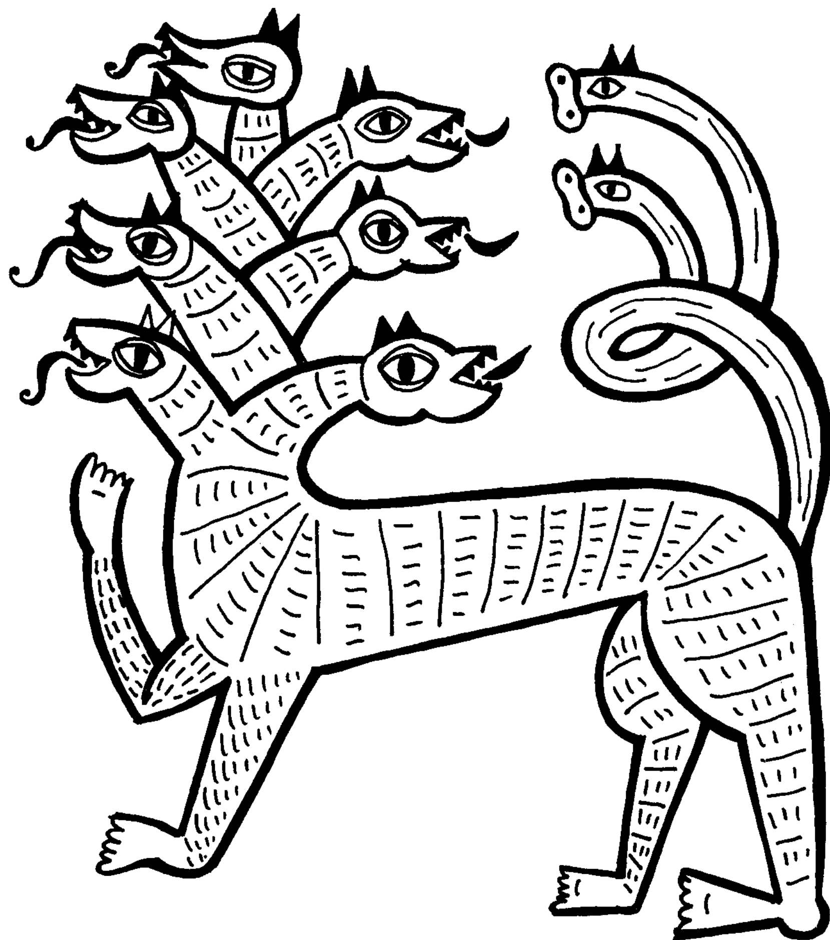
Russian Folk Belief is a basic survey of Great Russian (not Ukrainian or Belorussian) folk superstition, intended for a broad audience. For its material it draws heavily on ethnographic data collected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and on a number of excellent Soviet studies of this data. The book is divided into two parts: a general survey of folk beliefs about spirits and persons suspected of having dealings with the supernatural (Part 1) and a body of translated folk narratives (Part 2). I have not attempted to force any single interpretation of this material or to solve any of the individual controversies about particular mythological figures, though I have attempted to indicate where controversy exists and to provide enough bibliographical information for the interested reader to pursue the topic further. Nor have I considered the particular body of beliefs nourished by religious subgroups, such as the Old Believers.

The Library of Congress system of transliteration has been used for Russian terms in the text and for the notes and bibliographical entries. Dates are given according to the Julian Calendar (''Old Style''), which the Russians used until the Revolution. Thus, October 25 Old Style is November 7 New Style, or in accordance with the Gregorian Calendar adopted after the Revolution.

During the long years I have been working on this project, a number of people have been of assistance. Above all I am grateful to Professor Felix J. Oinas of Indiana University for sharing his years of scholarship with me. He read several chapters of this manuscript at an early stage, providing a helpful critique and alerting me to a number of specialized studies. When the work was near completion, he again made many valuable suggestions for improvement and agreed most generously to write the Foreword. Mrs. Ariadna Martin assisted in tracking down regional and dialectical peculiarities during the translation of the narratives in Part 2; Professors William R. Schmalstieg and Kenneth Thigpen gave me valuable advice on numerous occasions. The able staff of Slavic librarians at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign procured a number of rare items from the Soviet Union; Mrs. Ruth Senior and the staff of the Interlibrary Loan Department of The Pennsylvania State University spent long hours working on many requests for hard-to-find items. I wish also to thank the College of Liberal Arts of The Pennsylvania State University for granting me a sabbatical leave in Spring 1984, the Office of Graduate Research for providing financial assistance for research trips, Mrs. Claire Kreider of the Liberal Arts Computer Assistance Office for technical help, and Mrs. Anna Mary Smalley, secretary of Slavic Languages, for help with photocopying. My special appreciation goes to Patricia A. Kolb, executive editor at M. E. Sharpe, Inc., for her encouragement throughout this long haul, to Leslie English, my copy editor, and to Mrs. Sophie Schiller for her design and illustrations. Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to my family—Laszlo, Anna, and Ellen—for putting up with me through all this.

Summit Hill Farm
September 1987

Part 1 Folk Beliefs about the Supernatural



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1. The Pagan Background

Perhaps no period in the history of the search for folk traditions has yielded such wealth as that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Russia. The feverish activity of this era resulted in most of the major collections of oral literature and in numerous accounts of Russian village life and belief. If one facet dominates this abundant and varied material, surely it is its archaic quality: one can only be astonished at the degree to which the Russian peasant succeeded in preserving his ancient, pre-Christian customs and worldview. Indeed, almost every ethnographic study of village life from this period made this point. In his classic work on the village of Budogoshcha, V. N. Peretts noted that a thousand years of Christianity had penetrated the peasant's imagination only superficially and had not displaced his ancient beliefs in all sorts of "fantastic" spirits of nature.[1] Speaking of the Sol'vychegodsk District (Vologda Province), N. Ivanitskii made the extreme statement that his informant, a native of the village of Markovo and a peasant typical of that region, was a "complete pagan" who had heard something about God from his parents, but knew nothing whatsoever about Christ.[2]

Both the above studies pertain to out-of-the-way places in the Russian North, and there is no doubt that remoteness from centers of culture and trade fostered the preservation of ancient customs and beliefs. Nonetheless, one finds an abundance of similar statements for

areas of Central and Southern Russia. V. Bondarenko, for example, writing about Tambov Province, noted that "under the cover of Christianity, still understood only in its external form, many remnants of paganism have been retained."[3] Here and there ethnographers made a point of stressing that the peasants knew their prayers and attended church; they then invariably proceeded to describe a roster of beliefs and rituals of a clearly pre-Christian stamp.[4]

The term most often used for the interweaving of pre-Christian and Christian elements in the belief and practice of the Russian peasant is *dvoeverie*, or "double faith." The "double faith" of Christians addicted to pagan rites and superstitions is the brunt of the invective of many sermons of the first centuries of Russian Christianity, and it is the condition to which materials collected in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attest. Of course, it cannot be denied that in Western Europe as well elements of Christianity were grafted onto a pre-Christian heritage.[5] Still, the Russian case is extreme. The Russian peasant, more than his European counterpart, was isolated culturally and, in many instances, geographically, from the mainstream of his nation's development. Moreover, Russia experienced neither the intellectual upheaval of the Renaissance nor the purging of ancient superstitions of the Reformation. As G. P. Fedotov claims in his monumental study of Russian religious thought, *The Russian Religious Mind*, the peasant lived in the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century.[6]

The present work is a survey of the rich body of superstitions recorded by ethnographers and folklorists in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It focuses in particular on beliefs about minor spirits, the so-called "lower mythology" of the folk, and about sorcerers, witches, and other persons thought to possess supernatural powers. Even on the verge of the Soviet era the Russian peasant retained his belief in spirits of the house and farmstead and of various aspects of nature. While these personages were the clear inheritance of the pagan era, Christianity too made its contribution. In certain biblical figures and saints it provided the peasant with a roster of personages toward which to direct his aspirations for a bountiful harvest and personal happiness and, in the figure of the devil, with a major culprit on which failures could be blamed. Popular Christianity, however, was often a far cry from official Orthodoxy, for, as we shall see, many of its personages seem to be thinly disguised reworkings of pagan deities.

But, even though the traditions and spirit world of the Russian peasant contained reflections of ancient beliefs, one cannot make direct connections between particular notions of the nineteenth-century peasant and the pagan of, say, tenth-century Rus′. Over the centuries ancient beliefs and rituals acquired many additional layers, and it is often difficult to determine what is a later accretion and what is truly ancient. One thing is certain: the Russian pagan and his nineteenth-century descendant were both farmers whose primary concerns were fertility and bounty. When the harvest failed, the peasant went hungry or, worse, starved. The various agricultural rituals of nineteenth-century village life provide a valuable, if circuitous, avenue to Russian paganism. In recent years Soviet folklorists have written a number of excellent monographs that go a long way toward elucidating the precise meaning of these celebrations.[7] In addition, Soviet archeologist B. A. Rybakov has offered an interpretation of a fourth-century calendar for the region near Kiev that may allow us to make a reliable correlation between the festivities for the three-month period of peak agricultural activity in ancient Rus′ and the corresponding nineteenth-century holidays.[8]

Some knowledge of calendar rituals and the deities of Russian paganism is essential to an understanding of the worldview of the peasant. We shall therefore provide brief sketches of these areas before proceeding to a discussion of Russian folk belief in the nineteenth century.

Calendar Rituals

The seasonal celebrations of the Russian peasant had an agrarian stamp of an unmistakably pre-Christian nature. After Russia's baptism, the timing of the ancient holidays corresponded to that of major liturgical feasts. In some cases (Christmas) the date of the pagan holiday was close to that of the Church feast and thus changed very little; in others the variable date of Easter caused a displacement of several weeks in the ancient celebration. The religious aspects of these holidays were confined mainly to church attendance and processions with icons and holy water; most of the festivities that took place in the village displayed an almost total absence of Christian motifs. The following were the major holidays around which the peasant's agricultural year was organized in the nineteenth century.

Peasant calendar	**Church calendar**
Yuletide (*Sviatki, Koliada*)	Christmas to Epiphany
Shrovetide (*Maslenitsa*)	The eighth week before Easter
Trinity (*Rusal'naia*) Week	The week preceding Trinity Sunday
Ivan Kupalo	John the Baptist (June 24)
Harvest	

Besides the above, we might note: the "Welcoming of Spring" (March 1, 9, or 25), Palm ("Pussy willow") Sunday (*Verbnoe voskresen'e*), Holy ("Clean") Thursday (*Chistyi chetverg*), Easter, *Radunitsa* (Tuesday of St. Thomas Week, the second week after Easter), and St. George's Day (April 23).

Yuletude celebrations and the festivities of Ivan Kupalo's Day occurred at the winter and summer solstices. Shrovetide, which in ancient times occurred near the spring equinox, became a mid-winter celebration, and the spring equinox, which occurred during Lent, was observed by a far less mirthful and ribald holiday, the "Welcoming of Spring." The entire series of spring rituals celebrating the beginning and growth of vegetation was also affected by the timing of Easter. Most of these rituals were concentrated between Pentecost and Kupalo's Day, a period of three to six weeks depending on the date of Easter, though a few occurred earlier, and, in places, the duration of the celebrations extended to St. Peter's Day (June 29).[9]

Characteristic features of Yuletide were the singing of ritual songs (*koliadki*), the eating of certain foods, mummery, processions with persons masked as horses, bulls, or goats, mock funerals, and divinations. In addition, there were "evening gatherings" (*posidel'ki*) and other merriments lacking any particular seasonal stamp. Great Russian *koliadki*, often sung on Christmas Eve (*sochel'nik*) by bands of costumed singers moving from household to household, contained invocations to "Koliada" (a personification of the season), praise of family members, wishes for a bountiful harvest and an increase in livestock, requests for handouts, and, sometimes, a threat in case of refusal. Handouts frequently took the form of little pastries in the shape of cattle and other livestock (*korovki* [*korova—cow*], *kozuli* [*kozel/koza—*goat]). Motifs connected with the nativity of Christ were usually absent in the *koliadki*.[10] Mock funerals often involved carrying someone who pretended to be dead into the house and lamenting him in the midst of general laughter; sometimes a real corpse was used for this curious

game. Among the ritual foods prepared for Yuletide celebrations were *kut'ia*, a special porridge of whole grains, and pork. *Kut'ia* was a part of the traditional Christmas Eve meal, and pork was normally served at the New Year. Some reports note that during the Yuletide season peasants lit bonfires and invited their dead ancestors to warm themselves, though by the nineteenth century this custom was not widespread. The New Year was a time for divinations; these concerned primarily young girls wishing to know if they would marry in the coming year.[11]

Perhaps the merriest seasonal holiday was Shrovetide, the carnival season preceding Lent that was characterized above all by dissoluteness and gluttony. Entertainments included sliding, horse racing, fist fighting, and mock battles; pancakes (*bliny*) were the most characteristic food. A straw effigy called "Maslenitsa" played a major role in the festivities. Peasants invoked and welcomed "Maslenitsa" at the beginning of the holiday and at its end they engaged in a rite of burning the dummy on a field outside the village. A number of rituals were connected with the returning sun: lighting bonfires, circling the village on horseback with a torch, and pushing a wheel that contained a pole with a flaming torch around the village. Important rites took place in the cemetery, where a funeral meal was held amidst wailing and laughter, and some of the foods were left for the deceased.[12]

While Yuletide and Shrovetide had their individual flavors, they shared certain motifs. The dependence of their timing on the yearly cycle of the sun and the importance of bonfires in the celebrations were, no doubt, remnants of an earlier solar cult correlating the sun's cycle to the growth of vegetation.[13] Scholars also stress that from ancient times fire has been used for ritual purification and the expelling of spirits that could cause illness or have a malign effect on the future harvest.[14] Both Yuletide and Shrovetide were characterized by excessive eating and drinking, which has been understood as a magical use of like (abundance of rich foods) to produce like (fertility and bounty). Such ritual gluttony was largely absent from other holidays. Vladimir Propp explains its occurrence at these two times by noting that both holidays were, in a sense, celebrations of the new year: the folk agricultural calendar placed the beginning of the year near the winter solstice, but the Russian civil calendar, until 1348, reckoned the New Year from March. Thus, the magic of eating rich foods intensified the "magic of the first day."[15]

Fertility motifs can be glimpsed in other aspects of these holidays. Wishes for prosperity in the *koliadki* and gifts of food for the singers

can be viewed as attempts to ensure a desired result through a reenactment of it. Some commentators have called attention to the erotic element in processions with mock horses (often mares), goats, and bulls and in the custom of dressing as the opposite sex; such masquerading signals a break in normal laws of decorum and restraint and a license for obscene behavior and ribaldry.[16] Thus, one can understand Yuletide songs and games and traditional Shrovetide obscenity as a magical attempt to ensure fecundity. In many cases fertility and funereal motifs were interwoven. *Kut'ia* was a food characteristic of funeral meals, which gave Christmas Eve the aura of a repast for the dead. At the same time, as Propp claims, the whole-grain porridge highlighted the meaning of the seed as the mysterious container of new life.[17] The first of the Shrovetide *bliny* was sometimes presented as an offering to a dead ancestor, and *bliny* were among the foods taken to the cemetery.

The dominant themes of Yuletide and Shrovetide were repeated in the series of shorter holidays between Shrovetide and Trinity Week. The baking of pastries in the shape of birds during the "Welcoming of Spring" was at one time, no doubt, a magical attempt to ensure the return of the birds and hence of the warmth they signaled; by the nineteenth century this day had become a children's holiday.[18] Early vegetation played a significant part in Palm, or "Pussy willow," Sunday celebrations. Pussy willows were blessed in church and then kept above the icon for use in certain rites. The significance of the pussy willows was not just that they carried a church blessing, much as palms do in this country, but that they were one of the earliest forms of spring vegetation; hence, they were perceived to contain special productive and protective powers.[19]

V. K. Sokolova maintains that the primary element in Holy ("Clean") Thursday was ritual ablution in preparation for the spring field work as, indeed, the attributive "clean" or "pure" (*chistyi*) would imply.[20] Purification was carried out by washing in water drawn before sunrise and, in some areas, by fumigation with juniper smoke. On this day peasants prepared the salt that served prophylactic and curative purposes for the coming year. In places it was customary to make magic protective rings around farmsteads by circling them with an icon or sweeping around them three times. This ritual was intended to prevent the penetration of evil spirits and illnesses. Preparation for Easter took place on Holy Thursday: the house and yard were cleaned, eggs were decorated, and some ritual foods were baked. In places, rites and blessings intended to protect cattle occurred on Holy Thursday.

St. George's Day, however, was the traditional time for most of these, for throughout Great Russia it marked the first day of driving the cattle out to pasture. One of the usual rites of St. George's Day was the switching of cattle with the pussy willows blessed on Palm Sunday. In places on St. George's Day, as at Yuletide, peasants baked *kozuli*, the magical meaning of which was no doubt connected with the multiplication and protection of the herd. Peasants also fed the cattle special loaves prepared on Holy Thursday in order to guard them from unclean spirits.[21]

Though it marked the end of Lent and the beginning of the weeks of celebrations that followed, Easter itself was not one of the major agrarian holidays of the Russian peasant. Sokolova suggests that this was in part due to the centuries of struggle that the Russian Orthodox Church waged to keep its greatest feast free of pagan elements.[22] Still, certain ancient motifs remained, perhaps because the seasonal emphasis on rebirth and new life was compatible with the sense of the Church celebration. The coloring, exchanging, and rolling of eggs was one of the central features of this holiday, as was the preparing of certain foods—*kulich*, a ritual sweet bread, and *paskha*, a pyramid-shaped cake made largely of dry cottage cheese. Although these foods were blessed in Church on Easter morning and then used to break the Lenten fast, their pre-Christian significance as productive fertility magic is still evident. Eggs (like seeds) are a standard symbol of new life, and the act of rolling them on the ground can be viewed as an attempt to transfer their power to the earth. Sokolova notes that the baking and eating of ritual bread and the widespread custom of swinging on this holiday were important means of invoking springtime fertility.[23] Funeral motifs dominate *Radunitsa*, an ancient holiday celebrating dead ancestors and censured repeatedly in medieval sermons and chronicles for its ribald nature.[24] On this day, which occurred on Tuesday of St. Thomas Week, relatives carried out ritual wailing and feasting in the cemetery, obligatorily leaving gifts of eggs for the deceased.

The most important celebration of spring vegetation occurred the seventh (sometimes eighth) week after Easter; in parts of Russia this holiday was still known by its ancient name, "Rusal'naia Week," though it was usually called "Trinity Week" or "Green Yuletide" (*Zelenye sviatki*).[25] The Thursday of this week, *semik*, was the day on which funeral services were held for those who had not yet received proper burial.[26] Particular attention during this holiday was devoted to the birch tree as the symbol of vegetative power. Peasants decorated their houses inside and out with branches, and they selected one par-

ticular tree for garlanding and embellishing with ribbons, beads, etc. Usually this tree was left in the forest; in some areas it was cut and brought into the village. In either case it served as a focal point for the girls' songs, circle dances (*khorovody*), and vows of eternal friendship. Here and there the tip of the tree was bent to the ground, an act evidently intended to transfer the vegetative power from the tree to the earth. In places the ceremonies were terminated by throwing the tree, sometimes in female dress, into the local river or pond. Girls wove garlands of birch branches, and on Trinity Sunday threw them into a river for the purpose of divination. If the garland floated, it was adduced that the girl would find a fiancé in the direction it was moving; the garland's sinking was taken as a sign that the girl would die in the coming year.[27]

An important part of the celebration of Trinity Week was the welcoming and then "sending off" or "banishing" of the *rusalka*, a female spirit who, it was believed, left the water for the fields and forests at this time. These rites often involved making a doll that, at the end of the festivities, was ritually torn apart in the grain fields. The *rusalka* is an important personage of Russian lower mythology, and the only one connected with a ritual holiday; we shall have much more to say about this spirit in chapter 5.

By the end of the nineteenth century, communal rites on Kupalo's Day were known primarily in the Ukraine and Belorussia; in Great Russia, only a few central provinces retained them. Ethnographers point out that most of the features of the Kupalo celebrations had in fact been incorporated in the Trinity and Shrovetide festivities, which on the whole were much more developed in Great Russia than in the Ukraine or Belorussia. In some places in Great Russia, celebrations similar to those reported for Kupalo were carried out on St. Peter's Day (June 29).

Kupalo's Day occurred when the day was at its longest and vegetation was at its peak. The primary characteristic of the holiday was the lighting of bonfires and jumping through them. The fire of Kupalo was "new" fire, that is, obtained by friction, rather than from an existing fire, and this underscores its purifying significance. For this celebration, as for Trinity Week, a tree was decorated, placed in the middle of the festive area, and ritually destroyed at the end. The belief that on Kupalo's Day the sun imbued the waters with a special power by bathing somewhere on the horizon was widely disseminated, and ritual bathing was part of the merrymaking.[28] Everywhere, including in Great Russia, on Kupalo's Day peasants gathered special grasses and

dew to be used for medicinal purposes. Witches, too, supposedly engaged in gathering grasses and dew to be used for casting spells. Very widespread was the belief that in the forest on this day a miraculous fern bloomed with fiery brilliance, indicating the location of buried treasure.[29]

Like Shrovetide and Rusal'naia Week, Kupalo's Day was often represented by a doll or scarecrow named for the holiday and ritually destroyed (burned, drowned, or torn apart) at the end. Such rituals took the form of elaborate mock funerals in which wailing was intertwined with scoffing and laughter; peasants played the roles of the priest and deacon and censed the "corpse" using a clay pot steaming with hot coals and dung or a worn-out bast shoe. Nor were these the only occasions on which such funerals were held. We have already mentioned the analogous destruction of special trees during the Trinity and Kupalo celebrations and the funeral games of Yuletide. Similar rituals with effigies named "Kostroma" or "Iarilo" occurred in a number of places in Great Russia, usually between Trinity and St. Peter's Day.[30] In addition, there are reports about a curious ritual burial and, sometimes, exhuming of a cuckoo, usually in effigy.[31] The frequency of such rituals is so striking that we must agree with Propp's suggestion that they may well be the basic element in these holidays.[32] Moreover, they are an element that Russian holidays shared with those of other agricultural peoples worldwide.

Following the example of a number of prerevolutionary Russian scholars, Propp explains these rituals with reference to Frazer's theory of the religion of a dying and rising divinity of vegetation. The Russian variants, he notes, represent earlier stages of development than rites centered on such gods as the Babylonian Tammuz or Egyptian Osiris; the trees or scarecrows of the Russian rituals have no permanent existence apart from the ceremonies in which they are used. They have not achieved deification, but represent rather the spirit or power of vegetation. In the rituals surrounding them they "die" or, more accurately, are killed in order to assist plant growth and be resurrected, not in person, but in the new grain.[33]

V. I. Chicherov divides the peasant's agricultural year into two cycles: (1) rituals concerned with ensuring and calling forth an abundant harvest and (2) those accompanying the harvest itself. He notes that repetition of motifs characterizes the first cycle, which extends from Yuletide to Kupalo's Day, that is, from the winter to summer

solstices, while the second lacks this duplication.[34] Although other scholars dispute this schema, it is noteworthy that rituals connected with the destruction of a tree or scarecrow and other funeral rituals fall almost exclusively into Chicherov's first cycle.[35] They are significantly absent from the harvest.

On the other hand, the motifs of the harvest festivities connected with the cult of vegetation have elements in common with the earlier holidays. Particular attention was devoted to the first and last sheaves; often ceremonies surrounding the last sheaf merged with those surrounding a small patch of field left uncut and referred to as the "beard" of Il'ia, Volos, Nicholas, Egor, Christ, or, sometimes, a billy goat. Peasants ceremonially brought the first sheaf (*zazhinochnyi*, *zazhinnyi*) into the house, and they threshed it separately. In many places the grain from this sheaf was blessed in church and then mixed with the seed grain. The last sheaf (*dozhinochnyi*, *otzhinnyi*) was also brought inside, where it was decorated with ribbons and flowers or dressed in women's clothing. It was then placed in the entrance corner or under the icon until the Feast of the Intercession of the Mother of God (*Pokrov*, October 1), when it was mixed with the cattle's feed.[36]

Particularly interesting rituals surrounded the little patch of grain left uncut and standing in the field. Peasants decorated it with a ribbon, bent the heads to the ground in a rite known as "the curling of the beard," and offered it bread and salt, the traditional symbols of hospitality. According to widespread belief, the invisible spirit of the harvest preceded the reapers and hid in the uncut grain. Thus, the curling of the beard was a symbolic return of the power of vegetation to the earth in order to ensure fertility for the coming year.[37] With the harvest, the yearly cycle of agricultural holidays ended, and the peasants turned their attention to winter work, village marriages, and, of course, concerns about the harvest of the forthcoming year.

Russian Paganism

Most studies of East Slavic paganism have been based on written sources. These sources are scant and consist mainly of brief chronicle entries, sermons, and instructions, all dating from the Christian era and hostile to pre-Christian belief. Accounts of ancient myths and detailed descriptions of cults such as we have for Greece and the ancient Near East are almost entirely lacking. What East Slavic written sources do give is a list of probable deities, and, occasionally,

their attributes and functions. Yet, while these documents give very little information about the content of East Slavic paganism, they leave no doubt whatsoever that the broad masses clung to their ancient gods and rituals for centuries after Russia's baptism and that the lower clergy sometimes joined in these celebrations.

The best-known roster of pagan deities is that of the six whose statues Prince Vladimir erected on assuming sole rule of Kiev. According to the *Primary Chronicle* for the year 980, he "placed idols on a hill, outside the palace yard, a wooden Perun with a silver head and golden moustache and Khors and Dazhbog and Stribog and Simargl and Mokosh'."[38] Missing from this list is "Volos" (Veles), "the god of cattle" (*skotnii bog*) and, apparently, commerce, whose veneration in ancient Rus' is widely attested and by whose name, along with that of Perun, ancient Russians ratified oaths.[39] Medieval Russian sermons and letters of instruction to lower clergy give us additional names, suggesting that there was a difference between the "official paganism" of the fledgling Kievan state and the religion of the countryside. They repeatedly inveigh against ceremonial meals in honor of "Rod" and "Rozhanitsy" and against orgiastic celebrations in honor of "Kupalo," "Koliada," and "Iarilo." Elsewhere in these documents we encounter mention of "Svarog" and, in writings from the more western Slavic areas, of "Svarozhichi" (sons of Svarog), "Sviatovit," "Lada" (or "Lado"), "Lel'," "Polel'," and others.

It seems clear that Perun was the chief god of Vladimir's pantheon, a deity with affinities to the Lithuanian Perkunas, and, as commander of thunder and lightning, the Russian counterpart to such Indo-European atmospheric deities as Zeus, Indra, and Thor.[40] He was a god of war, as symbolized by the axe, and his cult was nourished not so much by the broad masses as by the princely class. It is likely that his position as principal deity was still relatively recent in tenth-century Rus'.[41] Khors and Dazhbog were sun gods; Dazhbog was also a "god of blessings" and the son of Svarog, another solar deity who, in his role as a divine smith, was a sort of Slavic Hephaestus.[42] Stribog remains particularly unclear; the twelfth-century literary epic, "The Lay of Igor's Campaign," refers to the wind as his grandson; E. G. Kagarov claims he was a deity of wind, storm, and dissension.[43] Khors, Stribog, and Simargl, the winged dog and guardian of seed and new shoots, represent the Iranian element in the ancient Slavic pantheon, thus reflecting the long years that the ancient Slavs lived side by side with the Scythians.[44] Linguistic analysis has suggested that Volos (Veles), in addition to his