



Viktor Shnirel'man (2012). *Russian Rodnoverie: Neo-Paganism and Nationalism in Today's Russia. (Russkoe rodnoverie: Neoiazichestvo i natsionalizm v sovremennoi Rossii)*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Bibleiskogo-Bogoslovskogo instituta (in Russian). — 302 pages.

This is the latest offering from Viktor Shnirelman, a well-known author, who, from the beginning of the 1990s, has been a pioneer in the study of a wide range of topics linked with Russian nationalism, anti-Semitism and the emergence of new ethnic religions in the post-Soviet period. Among these various topics, the delineation of Russian Neo-Paganism has always been central to his research, and the work under review continues and develops several earlier publications.¹ *Russian Rodnoverie*² features new material that facilitates a systematic and logical exposition of the history of Neo-Pagan

discourse and its institutional vicissitudes from the late Soviet period to the start of the 2010s.

The study is filled with innumerable characters who are associated, in one way or another, with *rodnoverie*—Russian Neo-Paganism—and is replete with the names of periodicals, books, organizations, dates and events. The reader is presented with a scrupulously documented and factually verified picture of Russian Neo-Paganism in all its heterogeneous, factional manifestations. Notwithstanding the merits of such microscopic exactness, it is necessary to admit that at times it renders the exposition somewhat difficult to digest; indeed, despite Shnirelman's narrative efforts and recognizably authorial, even moderately emotional, style, in several places the text takes on an almost encyclopedic, rather than analytical, character. The preponderance of facts is due, needless to say, to the au-

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1. See, for instance, Shnirel'man 1998, 2001; Shnirelman 1998.
2. The term *rodnoverie* is derived from the roots *rod* (clan, native, generation, race) and *ver* (faith, belief). — The editors.

thor's unwillingness to sacrifice the abundance of information that he has collected and systematized with such diligence over many years of research. However, this very abundance means that the reader—even if relatively well-informed on the topic in question—at times loses him or herself in the labyrinthine webs of material.

Nevertheless, *Russian Rodnoverie* is undoubtedly the most comprehensive of the works on Russian Neo-Paganism currently available; from a limited survey of the extant literature already published (given in chapter two) it is obvious that the work under review overshadows all other contributions to our present understanding of the subject. Over the course of his exposition Shnirelman makes a number of penetrating and verifiable observations, not all of which can be mentioned here. In this connection I will highlight the study's most interesting insights into the "Soviet" roots of Neo-Paganism, derived from an unbelievably wide-ranging mix of seemingly unrelated phenomena. Shnirelman uncovers these roots, for instance, in forbidden *samizdat* literature such as *The Word of a Nation (Slovo Natsii)* (1970); the patriotic attraction to national memory (exemplified, for instance, in the "monument defense" movement); the veiled

nationalist component of the late Soviet governing establishment; the works of science fiction, published in print runs of millions and closely associated with "patriotic novels," that shade into ethnocentrically charged fantasies (by, for example, Pyotr Proskurin, Dmitry Zhukov, Sergey Alekseev, Yury Sergeev, et al.); the reductively historical and pseudo-scientific "half-baked intellectuals" (*obrazovanshchina*);³ and, finally, the ubiquitous background of subtly encouraged anti-Semitism.

Chapter seven of *Russian Rodnoverie* provides an admirable description of how Neo-Pagan mythology and ideology have matured in such different environments as the Znanie (Knowledge) Society, the circle of Yuri Mamleev and the Pamiat' (Memory) Society, while in chapter eight Shnirelman traces the ideological development of those he considers to be the "founding fathers" of *rodnoverie*: V. Emelianov, A. Ivanov (Skuratov), A. Dobrovolskii (who "converted" to Paganism under the pseudonym of Dobroslav) and several others. Shnirelman offers an exceptionally fine evaluation of the dual role of Communist Party circles and their ideological apparatuses in relation to ethnocentric patriot-

3. The translation of this term was suggested in Vertlieb and Boldyrev 1985.

ism: they encouraged with one hand what they tried to crush with the other, and Neo-Pagan discourse hovered on the boundary between dissidence and a tendency toward unofficial support from within the party.

Ultimately, Shnirelman associates the entire late-Soviet project of introducing socialist ritualism and invigorating national (ostensibly atheist rather than religious) rituals that began in the second half of the 1950s to the support of Paganism “in the highest echelons of power” (97–98). However, if we are not applying the metaphor of “modern Paganism” to Soviet ideology as a whole, this would certainly seem to be an exaggeration, since the idea of “socialist ritualism” possessed its own logic. There is probably a kernel of truth in Shnirelman’s assertion that “the exaltation of nature” seemed less dangerous than the worship of Christ and the Mother of God (99), but it would not be true to assert that the patriotically inclined party hierarchy gave exclusive preference to Paganism. In fact, Russian Orthodoxy and the Orthodox heritage—in the context of their secular interpretation—had, from a certain time, been relied upon perhaps even more than Paganism as a focus of Russianness and Russian cultural memory, and as a basis for ethnic myth. Moreover, this trend possessed its own well-

known literature, advocates and propagandists, and even its own Orthodox anti-Semitism, showing that such attitudes were not exclusive to Pagans.

Nevertheless, Shnirelman correctly illuminates “the Soviet roots of Paganism” as a whole, offering a methodical description of how the fulminating mix of influences that he presents gave rise to a whole series of ethno-racial myths, which slowly matured, half-observed in the underbelly of Soviet society, and then “exploded” to full strength in the 1990s, directly after the removal of affected, yet hypocritical, prohibitions. According to Shnirelman, the basic mythologem professed by the early and late leaders of the *rodnoverie* movement was what he calls the “Aryan-Slavic myth,” around which all Russian Neo-Pagan edifices have consequently been aligned up to the present day. This myth—the original status of the Slavic-Aryan race, of truly Russian pre-Christian beginnings, of the foreignness of “Semitic influences” (including Christianity) and the vivifying force of Paganism—is the “native faith,” the worship of Nature, of the god Rod. Shnirelman shows how this dominant principle of Neo-Paganism naturally translates into political values, programs and actions, culminating in appeals for ethnic purity, and, subsequently, for eth-

nic cleansing (“Russia for Russians!”); taken to its extreme, it has led to neo-Nazism in the form of the skinhead movement. This logic unfolds as the book progresses and manifests itself in the very structure of the work: not for nothing is the last chapter called “From Ideology to Street Violence.”

Here we enter the realm of conceptual demarcations, on which it is worth dwelling in more detail. Shnirelman is most interested by the ethnocentric and ideological, or what could be termed the muscular and masculine, element of *rodnoverie*, which, by extrapolation, is always pregnant with racism and anti-Semitism. In Shnirelman's view it is precisely here that we must look for the core of Russian Neo-Paganism, and it would seem, at first glance, that in this he betrays a certain one-sidedness. However, Shnirelman is wholly conscious of the limits of this position, and he understands completely that the above-mentioned ideological element by no means exhausts the content of *rodnoverie*. Shnirelman is careful to delineate the contours of his investigation in the preface to the book: he aims “firstly, to give a generalized picture of the history of the Russian Neo-Pagan movement, and secondly, to analyze the issue of tolerance and intolerance within its ranks” (xiii). He stipulates further

that “Neo-Pagan myths, beliefs, rituals, communal life and gender roles are not examined here. All these are independent themes that require special consideration” (xiv). In defining the clear boundaries of his own scholarly interests, Shnirelman clearly indicates those directions that future investigations of Russian Neo-Paganism may pursue; when compared with the huge quantity of literature devoted to Neo-Paganism in the West, this remains a very broad and unploughed field.

Let us leave these subjects to future researchers, having noted, nevertheless, that, without an in-depth analysis of them, it is impossible to gain a comprehensive and full understanding of Neo-Paganism as part of a wider ecological paradigm within modern post-industrial culture, with its Romantic roots and its constructivist mechanisms. We shall now turn to that aspect of the problem that Shnirelman himself considers the most important. He devotes a long chapter (chapter fifteen) to “the search for spirituality” in Russian Neo-Paganism, where he turns precisely to those forms of the phenomenon that are *not* directly related to ethno-mythology and politics. Shnirelman gives due consideration to “peaceful” “searches for spirituality,” yet even there he discovers “latent racism and anti-Semitism” (203). At the same time Shnirel-

man underlines the differences between more and less tolerant, more and less xenophobic, associations. For example, he dwells in detail upon the Circle of Pagan Traditions, which is an exceedingly influential network of societies whose manifestos bear witness to its anti-globalization and anti-consumerist principles, as well as to its overt rejection of the idea of ethno-racial supremacy and anti-Semitism (225–35). Shnirelman also mentions other movements that he describes as “moderate,” particularly those that have taken part in the meetings of the World Congress of Ethnic Religions,⁴ which began in Vilnius in 1998.

In his conclusion Shnirelman carefully provides a balanced summary of xenophobia and tolerance among different directions and groups within *rodnoverie*, and it seems that he hesitates a little in his final evaluation, endeavouring to show caution. He notes that Russian ethnocentrism in one way or another is—perhaps inevitably—characteristic of the absolute majority of groups, and that Neo-Pagans often do not possess “precise answers” to questions regarding the role of the 20 percent of Russia’s popula-

tion that is not ethnically Russian; even worse, however, is when such “precise answers” are present, in which case they reduce to “the carrying out of ethnic cleansing of one kind or another” (251). Radically disposed young people are attracted by the more militantly jingoistic groups.

Yet to what extent is this trend towards ethnocentrism central or marginal? Here, Shnirelman introduces a careful formula full of academic tact, writing that “the negative tendencies that have been analysed in the present work do not flow from the essence of Neo-Paganism itself, but derive from the state of modern Russian society as a whole, and from the prevalence of xenophobic dispositions within it” (253). He adds that, although detailed research that would allow us to calculate the relationship between the “tolerant” and the “intolerant” in this sphere does not exist. If we proceed from an analysis of the printed sources on which Shnirelman’s work is based, we can assert that “those of a racialist inclination, with its concomitant chauvinism and xenophobia, predominate” (253).

In my opinion, Shnirelman’s arguments are fully measured and reliable: they link the phenomenon of *rodnoverie* with its social context as a whole, and thus at the same time help to ex-

4. The World Congress of Ethnic Religions is now known as the European Congress of Ethnic Religions. — The editors.

plain the particularities of Russian Neo-Paganism in comparison with its Western analogues. Shnirelman's conclusions also derive from a well-defined source base. The ethno-racial attitudes and political radicalism of the most active Russian Neo-Pagans (*rodnovery*), and those most noticed by the media, cannot be ignored, and Shnirelman's study provides full and convincing confirmation of this. For a comprehensive picture of *different* versions of Neo-Paganism a wider research program is needed, the directions for which are indicated within *Russian Rodnoverie* itself.

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(Translation by Keith Walmsley)

Alexey Sitnikov (2012). *Orthodox Christianity and the Institutions of Power and Civil Society in Russia. (Pravoslavie, instituty vlasti i grazhdanskogo obshchestva v Rossii)*. St. Petersburg: Aleteia (in Russian). — 248 pages.

Alexey Sitnikov's book, which is based on his doctoral dissertation, is devoted to "an analysis of Orthodoxy's influence on the molding of the institutions of power in Russian society, its structural stratification, and the emergence

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of a civil society" (9). It is one of this country's first comprehensive and systematized studies of this issue. Drawing on an extensive literature and a variety of historical sources, Sitnikov analyzes works by Russian and foreign scholars, and demonstrates the contradictions in, and the tendencies of, the development of church-society and church-state relations.