CHAPTER 12

“It was only a tiny spring”: Veneration, Value and Local Springs in Contemporary Russia

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Abstract

What can popular veneration of small natural springs tell us about the culture of place, evolving religious traditions, and meanings associated with water in a given culture? This chapter begins with a description of holy springs in the Orel region (south of Moscow), drawing on interviews, literary texts, and a rich on-line compendium of maps and narratives. The chapter considers how these springs are connected both to the spiritual lives of contemporary Russians, and efforts to reconstruct local history and senses of place in the post-Soviet era. Situating contemporary narratives within the history of both official and popular Orthodoxy (and contemporary advertising that exploits narratives of national identity), the chapter also considers whether such forms of veneration may contribute to environmental protection and local civic culture.

An underground river, flowing from no one knows where, breaks into the open, giving life. Grateful to the spring, people try in whatever way they can to support it.\footnote{References to this website, designated OR, will be made parenthetically in the text; numbers refer to the website listing of individual springs.}

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Sacred place is storied space.

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The place is unlike anywhere I’ve ever been. We park the bus in an open, graveled area and then walk through a grove of towering pines toward an open glade; there’s a small wooden chapel set back against the dark wall of woods, its smooth boards just barely lighter than the reddish bark
of the trees behind them. The building is a tiny square, its raised roof capped by a small onion dome. Farther on to the right is another simple wooden structure, a roofed portico with railings above a pool of water. My students wander over, leaning down toward the rippling surface beneath them; several of them walk out onto a kind of small dock, crouch down and extend their hands. The water is crystal clear, above a sandy bottom dimpled into large circles that slowly expand and contract. The water bubbles up from somewhere beneath us. We are uncharacteristically hushed, mesmerized by the spring itself, the filtered light, the smell of pine bark and moisture.

On that first trip to Orlovskoe Poles’e—an area that had just recently been made a national park, in the far northwest of the Orel region of central Russia—I was traveling into terrain that was in many ways deeply familiar. The woodlands are beautifully evoked in the short stories of Ivan Turgenev; my friend and guide Marina explained the politics of the park’s creation, and the furor over earthworks near the spring that threatened to upset the area’s hydrology. I had visited countless Russian churches, and had an informed sense of the complex relationship between the Orthodox hierarchy and popular traditions—both in nineteenth-century Russia (when Turgenev had written his stories), in the Soviet era, and now in the post-Soviet world of collapsed and emerging ideologies. All of this knowledge, and all of these contexts, could be brought to bear on this glade with its bubbling, sandy-bottomed spring. Harder to account for—but fundamentally important to acknowledge—was the power of the place itself. We wandered from the spring and the small bathing house nearby, deeper into the woods; the Russian ecologist accompanying us took a long stick and rustled along the top of a massive anthill. We tasted the lemony essence the ants emitted, and then the pungent sorrel leaves, just unfolding from under the litter of fallen leaves. “If you know the woods,” Nikolai said, “it’s impossible to go hungry.” We walked a long way along a winding dirt road, and then returned for shashlyk and cucumbers. All of this was in some ways a conventional weekend outing, with Russian families periodically driving up, piling out of their cars, large plastic bottles in hand, which they would fill from the spring before taking their own walks down the road. When we got ready to leave, at sundown, we too filled our bottles. I think now of the glade and the spring, the tiny bath house for pilgrims to immerse themselves, the trees with strips of cloth left tied as forms of supplication. A tiny glade in a big wood, refracting in imagination like a pool that never goes dry.