

**THE HEROIC
BALLADS
OF RUSSIA**

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The heroic ballads of Russia by L. A. Magnus

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BY

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The Tale of the Armament of Igor, etc.*

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LEGEND AND HISTORY

This book is a compilation of the earlier balladry of Russia. It does not profess to explain origins, or to put forward exhaustive theories, or to refute other writers. It is an attempt to set forth legends, as they are.

After all, what is the real barrier between history and legend? History consists of the annals of such accomplished facts as can be vouched by accepted evidence. In modern credence, history therefore excludes the miraculous or superhuman. But mankind lives not only on the indigestible crusts of hard fact; his abiding sustenance is his faith and his aspirations. These latter essentials are portrayed in legendry, and therefore both legendry and history, taken apart and in isolation, are fallacious. It is only in happier ages, when the dream can become the deed, and fact has been compelled to conform with imagination, that the two elements combine and the tale of each can approximate to a whole and sincere truth.

The earlier ballads of Russia depict an incessant warfare against infidels of three confessions, the Romans, (who in the eyes of the Orthodox, are schismatics), the Moslems, and also against some fragments of the Judaized Khazars. So far, then, the Ballads are a sublimate or crystallization of the entirety of the course and tragedy of Russia, hemmed in, as she has always been, by alien folks who barred her access to the open seas. These ballads furnish us with phantasms of a deeper reality: they preclude capricious imagination, and synchronize and emblemize the constant factors of early Russian history. This high function cannot be predicated in the same sense for the balladry of any other country. The French epic of Charlemagne, the German of Walther von der Vogelweide, could be products of pure fiction, which, once created, was written down and arrested; for the Western nations had their Froissarts and Ekkehardts and lay writers to express their national ideals: these nations had the luck to

be better educated and freer and more happily circumstanced, and had no need of such an indirect form of self-expression. But, on the other hand, the artistic products of the Western writers did not spring, albeit in so crude a way, from the people, and their work could not have been so innately popular as the Russian ballads, where popular romance grew and developed in oral tradition.

These early Russian ballads tell us of the life of the Courts and the nobles. There reigned despots whose authority was unlimited, whilst their power and tenure were precarious, so that law (the conception of which implies the availability at all times of a sufficiency of force, balanced and regulated by some established code, more or less ethical) was almost non-existent. This factor, one of the consistent retarding elements in Russian history, is very well portrayed in the ballads, with a deadly exactitude.

Again, in Russia, just as there has never been any law (at any rate in the Middle Ages), so, correlatively, there has never been any freedom. Consequently, criticism and free speech have nearly always had to take tortuous and concealed ways. Where all is darkness, and the few torchbearers are selfish, everyone must grope. Discontent has always had to take the form of cautious satire: and in this respect there is a gruesome continuity between the unknown minstrels of these early ballads and the great writers, such as Kryl6v or G6gol. The Kievite ballads are tales of the semi-barbarous byzantinism of a feeble principality; the later Moscovite ballads breathe a more modern spirit: and, between the lines, the attentive reader may detect some bitter criticism of the prevailing tyranny. Thus, there are many shrewd hits at the unpatriotic, polonizing nobles of the period of the *sm6la*, at the unjust judges, and the fatuity of the Tsars (e.g., when the name of the legendary emblem of monarchy, Vlad6mir is contorted into *Malod6mor*). In this regard, again, the ballads enshrine and synchronize the essence of Russian history.

Or, again, from another point of view, Russia (i.e., pre-Petrine) had only stray and occasional ambassadors, who journeyed abroad, and few and casual visitors from abroad. In the descriptions of these foreign visitors to the Court of

Prince Vladímir (to be found in these ballads), the reader can observe how such strangers impressed the Russians : they were much wealthier, much more ingenious, and yet so conceited and boastful.

Some few Russians were sent abroad to collect or to pay tribute : the prototype for such emissaries became Dobrýnya Nikítich. Somehow or other, for the purpose of impressing the mind of the nation and so forming history, it would seem as though this legendary figure were of more historical importance than a Sazónov, or even a Chichérin.

These haphazard goings and comings were of all sorts : some distinguished strangers from the Baltic came to rob, and others to trade—in the ballads we have Solovéy the Robber and Solovéy Budímirovich, the merchant. In such a figure as the legendary Etmanuil, King of Lithuania, it is an irrelevant circumstance for the true history of Russia that he may not have existed.

The readers will find that the description always turns on the Russian Court, which, however feeble externally, has always been the only reality and source of unity in Russian history.

This Court has always displayed the pettiest as well as the grossest vices of folly and corruption. Hints of criticism, which in other countries might have been more vocal, will be found in the ballads ; and, as a test of realism, the demeanour of the low-born Ilyá Múromets at the Court of Vladímir and the factual behaviour of Potiómkin at the Court of Catherine II. would be quite fairly comparable. Again, is it not, from the point of view of essential truth in history, almost superfluous which of these incidents did in fact occur ?

Alyósha Popóvich "the mocker of women," Churilo the "coxcomb" and profligate, are as real from this point of view as many historical courtiers, and, from a national aspect, have been much more educative. Vladímir's consort, Opráksa, is a dignified and typical queen of Russia, and Vladímir himself, shows in his character the lassitude and capriciousness of most of the Russian Tsars.

There is very little of the popular element in these ballads, save in those of Nówgorod, where the homely touch is upper-

most, and there students of Russian revolution may have something to learn from the pranks of Vasili Buslávich.

So we may sum up where we began. This compilation of the earlier ballads of Russia may be regarded as a contribution towards Russian history. It aims merely at translating the narratives. Most of the stories have been abstracted and retold: an occasional attempt has been made to reproduce, as nearly as possible, the original accentual metre.

The Russian ballads deserve a much more serious and detailed study; for, in the concept of the higher unity of history, in which the actual happenings are inextricably blent with the unfulfilled longings and perpetual dreads of a people, these ballads can take an equal place with the documentary records of the Russian State.

L. A. M.

TRANSLITERATION AND PRONUNCIATION

All vowels to be sounded as in Italian.

a as in *Alms* ; *e* as in *été* ; *i* as in *plique* ; *o* always as in *pOlka* ; *u* as in *fUll*. *y* consonantly as in *Yet* ; as a vowel, rather deeper than *i* in *swIm*.

CONSONANTS.

ch or *c* as *ch* in *CHurCH* ; in Polish written *cz*.

dy or *d'* as in " *How D'Yer do ?* "

g always hard as in *Give*.

j as in *JuDGs*.

kh as German *ch*.

l guttural, as in *huLL*, except before *i*, *e*, *ya*, *yo*, when it is sounded *mouillé* e.g. *brILLiance*.

s always hard as in *So*.

tv as in " *WhaT'Yer think ?* "

sh as in *EngliSH* also represented *š*.

shch as in *freSH-CHeese*.

v at the end of words almost as *F*.

z always soft as in *Zebra*.

Zh or *ž* soft as in *leiSure*.