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Review of Russell Zguta, *Russian Minstrels: A History of the Skomorokhi*¹

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An exploration of the social and cultural history of the *skomorokhi*—East Slavic minstrel-entertainers prominent in Kievan Rus’ and Muscovy between the tenth and seventeenth centuries C.E.—and their impact on Russian society and art at large, *Russian Minstrels* is of dire significance to scholars and lay people in a number of fields. Though Zguta’s work is principally meant for Slavacists, folklorists, oral literature specialists, music historians, and medievalists, selected sections of the study are recommended for art historians and classicists, especially those interested in comparative literature. Just as Nikolai Karamzin set out to write the first definitive history of Russia during the early nineteenth century, Zguta has written the first comprehensive English-language analysis of the *skomorokhi*’s role in Russian cultural and social history, which is supported by a historiographical discussion and textual evidence from contemporary chronicles, registers, and literary works as well as artistic and toponymic evidence. Zguta “rescue[s] the Russian minstrels from the historical obscurity to which they have been relegated”² by framing them within the context of their contributions to medieval Russian popular culture and by countering past assumptions of the *skomorokhi*’s distance from medieval Russian *haute culture* through meticulous archival research and analysis of past studies and their biases. Though more than thirty years old, Zguta’s *Russian Minstrels* is still the primary study of *skomoroshestvo*, its origins and history, and its influence on Russian oral literature and performing arts. It is the essence of good

¹ Russell Zguta, *Russian Minstrels: A History of the Skomorokhi* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), ISBN: 0812277538.

² Zguta, 121.

historical writing—concise but exhaustive in its content and coverage—and should be found among any collection on medieval Russia and Eastern Europe.

Russian Minstrels is divided sensibly into five chapters, the first three of which cover the three historical divisions of *skomoroshestvo* (origins, golden age, decline), while the latter two analyze the influence of the *skomorokhi* and Russian oral literature and performing arts. In his short introduction, Zguta puts his study in context, and points out that the *skomorokhi* “have been the subject of only two brief monographs and a handful of specialized essays.”³ The status of *skomorokh* studies today is unchanged, with the exception of this one book. Chapter one, “Origins and Early History,” provides the background for the *skomorokhi* but also for the subjection of existing sources to Zguta’s “rigorous scrutiny.”⁴ The author challenges the notion held by many Slavists that the origins of the *skomorokhi* lie outside of the Slavic world, either in Byzantium or Western Europe—it is true, Zguta points out, that medieval Germanic *Spielmannen* and Byzantine court musicians were active in Russia and sometimes popular with the elite, especially the *organon* players and Byzantine troupes. To be sure, the *skomorokhi* did not appear on record until the eleventh century, after the official conversion of Kievan Rus’ to Orthodox Christianity under Vladimir I in 988, but Zguta believes, as do Beliaev and Afanas’ev, that the *skomorokhi* evolved from pagan priests and performers of rites among the pre-Christian Eastern Slavs. This origin explains the *skomorokhi*’s strong connection to Russian pagan festivals like the *Koliada*, *Maslenitsa*, and the *Rusalii*, as well as their strong condemnation by church officials early on and throughout their history. Even after the East Slavs’ conversion, Zguta notes, the *skomorokhi* contributed to the medieval Russian religion called *dvoeverie*, or dualism, which was popular among many newly converted peoples.⁵ The *skomorokhi* were also widely viewed as powerful magicians whose music had

³ Zguta, xi.

⁴ Zguta, xii.

⁵ c.f. Bogomilism in Bulgaria, or Manichaeism, though the latter was a separate, non-Slavic phenomenon.

supernatural power, they gained a “reputation as warlocks,”⁶ and they were condemned by church officials for taking precedence over the priests in marriage and other domestic ceremonies.⁷

In chapters two and three, Zguta outlines the golden age and the decline of the *skomorokhi* and divides the history of *skomoroshestvo* along three historical dates: 988, the conversion of Kievan Rus’, marking the end (anachronistically) of paganism and thus the creation of the *skomorokh* as a separate class; 1571, the year that Tsar Ivan IV (the Terrible) sacked Novgorod, once the center of *skomoroshestvo*, forcing the *skomorokhi* to move to Moscow, which was the “beginning of a period of rapid decline”; and 1648, when Tsar Aleksei published two edicts against the *skomorokhi*, making their existence illegal. It is interesting to note the dearth of information on the *skomorokhi* during the period between the late eleventh century and 1571—while they appear in unofficial sources, most especially proscription by Orthodox clergymen, they are nonexistent in the state chronicles and records, as they had been both before and after this period. Ironically, however, this period also marks the high point of the *skomorokhi*, their epoch or golden age. They were so prominent a cultural institution, Zguta remarks, that they appear as illuminations in church documents and on the walls of churches themselves, even though these very same documents and the churchmen were the most avid enemies of the *skomorokhi*, seeing them as “the direct antithesis of the Christian ethic”⁸ and as pagan holdovers. This period, also called the “Northern” period, was a time of migration for the *skomorokhi* northward to lands where conditions were more economically and socially favorable, partly because of the lack of Mongol influence in the northernmost cities. However, while Zguta spends no time whatsoever discussing the possible relation between the *skomorkhi* and the Mongols because of a lack of written evidence, it seems likely that the Mongols played a much greater role in the rise of the status of the *skomorokh* during the period than Zguta is willing to admit. Whatever the case, by the reign of Ivan IV,

⁶ Zguta, 9.

⁷ Zguta, 13-14.

⁸ Zguta, 24.

the *skomorokhi* were widespread in nearly every province and were quick to follow the trail of Ivan's campaigns, many making a double living as paid soldiers. Demographically speaking, Zguta concludes through state records that in some areas the *skomorokhi* outweighed or matched the number of residents employed in more practical professions, such as bakers, butchers, and tanners. It was also during this period that the *skomorokhi* enjoyed widespread court patronage; however, Ivan IV's forced transplantation of the *skomorokhi* from the North to Moscow, a city already teeming with other minstrels, encouraged the minstrel-entertainers to seek employment in other fields, beginning the steady decline of *skomoroshestvo*. The last straw for the *skomorokhi* came during the zealous reign of Aleksei Romanov who, at the insistence of his religious supporters, proscribed the *skomorkhi* completely, banning their entrance into towns and cities. This ban was not solely due to the clergy's fear of the *skomorokhi* as pagans, but was coupled with economic revolts and a string of violence and robberies meted out by several bands of itinerant *skomorokhi* called *prokhozhi*, the most famous of whom was Grishka Muryshka.⁹ This series of crimes climaxed in the mid- to late-seventeenth century.¹⁰ Zguta makes it clear that the *skomorokhi* as a class were blamed for the actions of a few, but regardless of the *gramoty* issued by Aleksei against the *skomorokhi* and their mass excommunication, Zguta cites evidence that some still existed—even in large numbers—as late as 1768, when P. A. Demidov wrote to G. F. Miller about his investigation of folk singers in the Urals, who appeared to be *skomorokhi*. Though the *skomorokhi* died out, Zguta is intent on proving their influence on later Russian cultural and social identity, which he does quite successfully in his final chapters.

Chapters four and five offer a discussion of the influence of the *skomorokhi* on medieval Russian popular culture, especially oral literature and the performing arts. Perhaps the most famous oral literature of the Kievan Rus' period is the *bylina* (pl. *byliny*), oral heroic epics that were taken from their traditional court setting and transmitted to the rural population by the *skomorokhi*, who imbued them

⁹ Zguta, 49.

¹⁰ Zguta, 63.

with the bawdy humor typical of their craft.¹¹ Zguta further posits that the *istoricheskie pesni*, or historical songs, many of which concern the campaigns of Ivan IV, were composed by those *skomorokhi* involved in the campaigns; and, just as he does concerning the *byliny*, Zguta provides evidence towards the importance of the *skomorokhi* as spreaders of folktales (*skazki*), folk remedies and charms (*zaklinaniya*), and Russian proverbs. Regarding the performing arts, it is impossible to separate the *skomorokhi* from music, theatre, and dance, for they were part and parcel to the livelihood and popularity of the medieval Russian minstrel-entertainers. They also had a profound influence on contemporary music, including Orthodox Church music and festival songs as well as the popularization of musical instruments. Because “dance has been described as one of the most ancient manifestations of man’s spiritual and emotional being,”¹² the *skomorokhi* as representatives of Russia’s pre-Christian beliefs naturally had a major role to play in Russian dance, most obviously in the *khovorod*, a circle dance in which the entire community would dance together. Zguta also points out that in the many cases in which the *skomorokhi* are depicted in art, they are often shown in traditional dancing poses. Though dancing itself is hard to study chronologically, the significance of the *skomorokhi* was such that their dances have been recorded in art and tradition. Zguta dedicates the majority of chapter five, “Contribution to Music, Dance, and Theatre,” to the influence of the *skomorokhi* on theatrical traditions. Though Soviet historians have claimed that Tsar Aleksei invented the first Russian theatre troupes, Zguta makes it obvious that the *skomorokhi* were the original thespians of Russia, most notably as puppeteers and religious performers during those formerly pagan holidays taken over by the Orthodox Church.¹³ Zguta’s conclusion is that, had the *skomorokhi* not intervened and “nurtured them in their embryonic

¹¹ Related to the Russian *skomorokhi* are the South Slavic and Albanian *guslari*. Milman Perry and A.B. Lord studied South Slavic *guslars* in the Balkans in the twentieth century to discover the oral origins of Homeric epic, and Robert Elsie has studied the Albanian *gulsars* in our century.

¹² Zguta, 107.

¹³ Zguta. 110.

state,” earlier performing arts that, like the *skomorokhi*, were pagan leftovers, would have “withered and died.”¹⁴

The *skomorokhi*, as Zguta bemoans, “can truly be described as the forgotten class of Russian medieval society,”¹⁵ but *Russian Minstrels: A History of the Skomorokhi* challenges the notion that the *skomorokhi* were not more than itinerant travelling entertainers whose existence had little effect on Russian popular culture, either then or now, and that in the scheme of Russian cultural and societal history, they meant very little. In fact, as *Russian Minstrels* shows, the *skomorokhi* were only one of many classes of medieval minstrel-entertainers, and they played a major role before Kievan Rus’ Christianization as priests, and thereafter as entertainers, spiritual advisers, and transmitters of Russian high culture to the masses in the form of *byliny*, theatre, music, and historical songs. Contrary to many historians’ opinions, the *skomorokhi* were so prominent as to be painted among the illuminations and paintings in Orthodox documents and churches, to receive payment two to three times that of ordinary court officials, and to outlast officials’ proclamations that illegalized not only their livelihood but the *skomorokhi* themselves. Any Russian historian, medievalist, folklorist, or music historian who has not found themselves enamored of the story of the *skomorokhi* and the wonder of the “epoch of the *skomorokhi*”¹⁶ as analyzed and recited in Russell Zguta’s *Russian Minstrels*, has not completed their education.

¹⁴ Zguta, 120.

¹⁵ Zguta, xi.

¹⁶ Zguta, 1.