

**ALEKSANTERI INSTITUTE
SPRING 2011**



Thursday, 21 April 2011 at 14:15 Aleksanteri Institute, Unioninkatu 33, Meeting room 2nd floor
Prof. Christine D. Worobec

Orthodox Pilgrimages in Late Imperial Russia

ABSTRACT:

The last decades of Imperial Russia witnessed a tremendous increase in Orthodox pilgrimages to faraway Russian monastic institutions and churches. Pilgrims traveled on foot, cart, train, and steamship to venerate miracle-working icons and saints' relics for spiritual fulfillment and in some cases healing of illnesses and disease. Some had made vows to visit particular holy sites to give thanks for already cured illnesses. A combination of factors coalesced to encourage believers and some non-believers to converge on these sites. These included the opening of a national railway system, an explosion in guidebooks and popular literature for pilgrims, the commemoration of religious anniversaries, and beginning in 1896 the creation of new saints in the Orthodox calendar, whose reliquaries were purported to be particularly strong in working miracles.

Miraculous cures at saints' graves or through visions of holy persons in dreams were regular occurrences in late Imperial Russia. The narratives describing these cures reveal a Russian Orthodoxy that was not stuck in the quagmire of medievalism and obscurantism, but rather a religion that held relevance for people's lives, regardless of their gender and class. The sacred stories demonstrate individual as well as collective experiences with the divine. To be certified as such, miraculous cures of individuals had to be witnessed by others and in the case of some posthumous miracles ascribed to holy persons, verified by investigation of the Holy Synod. Print culture not only disseminated the stories of the miraculous throughout European Russia, but also beckoned the infirm to visit local and national shrines. These religious sites enjoyed the imprimatur of the Russian Orthodox Church and the support of pilgrims who believed that their prayers had more powerful results at these shrines.

Yes, as the paper will demonstrate, tensions between clergy and pilgrims did occur at monastic institutions that were struggling to stay apart from the profane, modern world. Intent upon maintaining the strict regimens of their spiritual communities and raising the spiritual and national identities of worshipers, abbots unsuccessfully tried to control pilgrims and pilgrimages. Individuals continued to flock to monastic institutions to satisfy their own spiritual and physical needs, bringing with them their human flaws and frailties. At the same time, while miracles cut across gender and socio-economic lines, the declining representation of peasants in the new miracle cults of the modern age suggests a disturbing trend in Russian Orthodoxy. Miracles among commoners, whose dependence on spiritual healing was greatest, and some of their ailments, such as demon possession, had become suspect. The social divide that the lower classes experienced at the glorification ceremonies and at the saints' springs served as a constant reminder of a community of believers in which some were more equal before God than others. The egalitarian nature of visions of saints was somewhat belied by practices on the ground.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Christine D. Worobec is Board of Trustees and Distinguished Research Professor at Northern Illinois University. A recipient of numerous NEH fellowships, a 2010 fellowship from the Institute of Advanced Studies in Paris, and Outstanding Achievement Award from the Association for Women in Slavic Studies, she has published widely on Russian and Ukrainian peasants, women and gender issues, and religious history. Both her *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period* (Princeton University Press, 1991) and *Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia* (Northern Illinois University, 2001) won the Heldt Prize. Her recent publications include the co-edited two-volume *Women and Gender in Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and Eurasia: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (M.E. Sharpe, 2007); the edited *The Human Tradition in Imperial Russia* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009); and "The Unintended Consequences of a Surge in Pilgrimages in Late Imperial Russia," *Russian History* 36 (2009): 62-76.

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