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Alexander Nikolaevich Afanas'ev

### Folktales and Censorship

In the nineteenth century, mostly due to the preliminary work in Germanic folklore done by the Brothers Grimm, many scholars across Europe started to collect folklore. Scholars such as Giuseppe Pitre in Sicily, Henry Gaidoz, E.H. Carnoy, and Gaston Paris of France among many others would spend time in rural areas speaking to storytellers in order to make not only collections of folktales for publication to the growing literate middle classes, but to preserve and study, just as the mythologies of antiquity are still studied today. Just as the Brothers Grimm stood out from among their contemporaries in their pursuit of and definitions concerning methodology of folklore collection, Alexander Nikolaevich Afanas'ev stood out for his collection, publication, and study of Russian folklore.

Afnas'ev was born in 1826, and attended the gymnasium in Voronezh, then attended Moscow University in the department of Law. After achieving a degree in 1848 he was not passed for admittance into a professorship at Moscow University. However, after a few months, he began working in the main archive of the Foreign Affairs office in Moscow. In 1856 he became the chief archivist and from there he became the Commissioner of printing treaties. According to Barag and Novikov this particular position afforded him the time to pursue his interests in mythology and folklore and to communicate with important figures in scientific and literature circles in Moscow (Barag et al. 381, 382).

## His Works

In 1847, prior to his graduation from the University, he had begun writing articles for various literary and scientific journals. After his graduation he continued publishing articles in thick journals such as the *Sovremennik*, *Otechestvenye zapiski*, *Ruskye Vestnik*, *Biblioteka Dlya Chteniya*, *Knijny Vestnik*, *Filologicheskyye zapiski*, *Ruskaya Rech*, *Bibliograficheskyye Zapisky*, as well as the almanacs, *Kometa*, and *Athenaem*, to name just a few. The subject matter of his articles varied from his literary critiques of the satirical journals during the period of Catherine the Great, to the economy under Peter I, to pieces detailing theories he was developing concerning the folklore he was collecting. He wrote as many as 50 articles for *Sovremennik*, and over 30 articles for *Otechestvenye zapiski* alone (Barag et al. 382).

With direction from the Russian Geographic Society, he brought together and systematically arranged folktales that were being collected by other folklorists as well as from his own field work. Altogether, he collected over 600 folktales from sources as various as the Russian folklorist, Vladimir Dahl, as well as from the archives of the Russian Geographical Society. He published most of these folktales in eight volumes, called *Narodniye Ruskiye Skazky* between 1855 and 1863 (Barag et al. 383; Perkov 14).

In addition to the folktale collections, he published a detailed analysis of some of the folktales and their connections to pre-Christian Slavic religious beliefs. This was published in three volumes, called *Poeticheskiye Vozzreniya Slavyan Na Prirodu*, between 1865 and 1869. He prepared a collection of folktales specifically for children as well as a book specifically of Russian legends, *Ruskiye Narodniye Legendy*. With N. Shchepkin and V.I. Kasatkin he also published a literary journal of his own called *Bibliograficheskyye Zapisky* (Barag et al. 389).

## Social Climate

The social climate of the time created a very interesting period in Russian history. Alexander II had ascended the throne upon Nicholas I's death and had almost immediately relaxed many of his father's most repressive measures. The new tsar inherited quite a number of issues, among them the loss of the Crimean War, growing dissatisfaction among the intelligentsia and the serfs, as well as monetary issues involving both the failed war and the serfs. Tsar Alexander had, as Grand Duke, served on many of his father's secret committees concerning peasant reform as well as railroad construction. The sprawling size of the Russian Empire had been an ongoing issue for his father and Alexander seemed intent on carrying forward his father's ideas on unifying the disparate groups within the country (Rieber 44).

Under Tsar Alexander, Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich tackled some of the problems through the naval ministry and the many various expeditions he made for the tsar and the Russian Geographical Society. The naval ministry also oversaw a group of ethnographers, whose jobs were to study various ethnic groups, report back to their superiors, and to write interesting stories about these same groups for the reading public, in the interest of making those who appeared to be strange, unfamiliar and distant in the vast empire, seem as neighbors (Clay 46, 47, 50).

These ethnographers reported on quite a variety of topics beyond just the lifestyles of those they were sent to study. They reported how their own clean shaven appearances made the various ethnic groups distrust them, as well as the great variety of religions in the various regions, challenging the old view of the people as being homogeneously Russian Orthodox. The ethnographers, while detailing the social aspects also studied the religious differences of the

various groups, including Islam, Judaism, shamanism and nature veneration, and seemed to unanimously agree that tolerance was the best choice. With this high degree of openness and intellectual inquiry occurring, it seems incredibly strange that Afanas'ev should have had trouble with the censors (Clay 55).

### Censorship

Afnas'ev was no stranger to the strictness of censorship at the time. During his article writing, he encountered a great deal of difficulty in getting anything past the censors into publication. Much of this had to do with his focus on mythology and its association with the pre-Christian Slavic religions. However in later years it was apparent that his association on the periphery of more democratically minded literary circles was at issue as well (Barag et al. 392).

His first published collection was *Ruskiye Narodniye Legendy* (Legends of the Russian People) in 1860 which contained a collection of national legends concerning the lives of the saints and of Christ from the perspective of the peasants. The book at first passed the censor, however the Chief Proconsul of the Most Holy Synod filed a complaint with the Moscow Metropolitan. He complained that the collection was "full of blasphemy and immorality." The book was subsequently banned and the censor was fired. It is interesting to note that while the Russian publication date is set at 1860, a previously published edition outside of Russia dates to 1859. Barag and Novikov indicate that this edition was published by Alexander Herzen's Free Press. Afanas'ev had apparently grown tired of the delay the censor caused and desired an uncensored edition (Barag et al. 383, 391).

The banning of *Ruskiye Narodniye Legendy* caused him to cease publishing his own journal, *Bibliograficheskiye Zapisky*, (Bibliographic Notes) for a time, for fear of more stringent measures. He was also often encouraged to alter the written style of the folktales in *Narodniye Ruskiye Skazky* (Folktales of the Russian People) in order to be less coarse of speech. However, he refused to do so, and persisted in sticking to rigorous methods of reportage in transcribing only exactly what he was told by his sources, just as the Brothers Grimm had encouraged their peers in folklore collection (Barag et al. 392).

He is reported to have made one trip out of Russia in the year 1860, ostensibly to meet Alexander Herzen as well as to meet with other folklorists of the day. There seems to also have been quite a history between Herzen and Afanas'ev, if not in a direct face to face manner, then certainly by mail and via Viktor I. Kasatkin. Afanas'ev is reported to have been one of Herzen's sources of information concerning events, such as peasant uprisings, transpiring within Russia, and some of the articles published anonymously in Herzen's *Polyarny Svezdy* (Polar Star) have been linked to Afanas'ev due to censored copies of those same articles having been printed in his own journal, *Bibliograficheskiye Zapisky* (Barag et al. 394).

In light of his connection with Herzen it then comes as no surprise when in the year 1861 Afanas'ev was denounced and an investigation into his dealings was begun. No charges against him were filed due to the fact that a search of his living quarters revealed no incriminating material. However several others in literary circles did not fare as well. The suspicion continued and Afanas'ev was dismissed from his employment in the archives by royal decree (Barag et al. 399, 400).

While unable to assume a permanent position anywhere for the space of several years, he did continue his research and writing activities. After the publication of the first volume of

folktales, requests for a children's book had been made. However he refused to undertake this project until his collections of folktales were completed. When the collections were done only then did he publish the children's book (Barag et al. 400, 418).

### *Ruskiye Zavetniye Skazkiy*

Upon the death of Afanas'ev in 1871, a group of anonymous publishers in Switzerland published a book they called *Ruskiye Zavetniye Skazkiy*. (Russian Secret Tales). The folktales in this book were erotic, anti-cleric, and anti-nobility in nature. According to Barag and Novikov, Afanas'ev's friend and one of the co-publishers of his journal, V. I. Kasatkin, had taken the manuscript with him to Switzerland in 1862. Kasatkin had been an intermediary between many writers in Russia and Alexander Herzen. However, while on this particular trip to the West, Kasatkin was tried in absentia, exiled and unable to return to Russia.

*Ruskiye Zavetniye Skazkiy* obviously could not have been published in Russia in those times due to the lurid content of the tales, and for some unknown reason Kasatkin waited until the year after Afanas'ev's death to publish them in Switzerland. The tales did eventually get printed in Russia in 1880, however, during a brief window of publishing freedom (Barag et al. 395).

Gershon Legman states that the publication of these tales was momentous to the folklore community, which had been grappling at that time with the problem of publishing the more lascivious of their collections while trying to maintain the standards of morality according to the times in which they lived. While the publication of the tales was anonymous in nature it didn't take very long for noted folklorists to figure out who had been the original collector of these

tales, which were published with a commentary that scholars have since connected to Giuseppe Pitre, who was a known part of the folklorist circle in which the manuscript was circulated. Some of the tales were also published, after being translated into French, for the journal *Kryptadia*, a yearbook of erotic folklore. Later a translation from the French into English was made by Charles Carrington and the tales made their way to England, although many changes in explicit language had been made to accommodate the mores of the time (Legman 239, 240).

The importance of such erotic tales however, cannot be underestimated. Profane language is an inherent part of any language and should be studied. However, due to censorship in the age of Afanas'ev and the exclusion of profane words from many dictionaries of the time, the full meanings of given words can often only be guessed from the context of the tales where they appear. It has been conjectured that if it were not for Afanas'ev's faithful recording of these tales, quite a number of words and terms would be completely lost (Drummond 14).

In conclusion, the profound lack of information available in the English language about Afanas'ev and his complete body of work belies the importance of this literary figure. Several of his books appear to never have been translated into the English language which leaves him as a shadowy figure, almost completely unknown except in Slavic folklore circles. However, his stature could be as important as that of the Brothers Grimm. In Russia the study of his literary works and of his research continues. One can only hope that in the future the West will see the rest of his body of work translated, along with his articles and personal diary. The translation of his papers and works could shed a tremendous light on not only the folklore of the Slavs and its possible relation to pre-Christian beliefs, but also could shed greater light on the religious censorship of that time.

The list of those who have been inspired by his work continues to grow, including the names of such luminaries as Dostoevsky, Blok, Pasternak, and Rimsky-Korsakov. Stravinsky's *Firebird* was drawn from the studies in *Poeticheskiye Vozzreniya Slavyan Na Prirodu*. Maxim Gorky is reported to have written to a young writer, "When you have in your hands Afanas'ev's book '*Poeticheskiye Vozzreniya Slavyan Na Prirodu*', hold on to it and read it carefully." Upon hearing of Afanas'ev's passing Ivan Turgenev wrote "Recently A.N. Afanas'ev literally died of hunger, and his literary achievements will be remembered when we with you, my dear friend, have been long since covered with the darkness of oblivion." (Barag et al. 402, 403, 406; Jakobson 639)



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