

## Introduction to Byliny, Russian Heroic Poems

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The *byliny* (plural of *bylina*) are Russian epic songs that are loosely tied to historical events of 11-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Byliny* were first collected in the mid to late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The first serious collection was collected in mid 1700s, by Kirsha Danilov, probably a *krepostnoy* (a serf) folk singer from Ural mountains for his master, a land and factory owner, P.A. Demidov. This collection was first published in 1804. Many other collections followed. The *bylina* tradition seems to have died out in 1960's; however, now seems to be on the rise again.

The scholar who rediscovered *byliny* was P.N. Rybnikov, who accidentally overheard a singer entertaining a group of travellers in 1860 in the Kizhi district. By the nineteenth century, the *byliny* survived only in the north of Russia, were performed for entertainment, and were sung by a single singer without music. Rubnikov later collected several hundred *byliny* in many variants, and published them between 1861-1867.

A.F. Gilferding collected about 300 hundred tales from the same region in 1871-1872, which were published posthumously in 1873 as another collection.<sup>1</sup>

The term *bylina* (something that has happened), as applied to this sung folk epic was first used by Sakharov in 1830, the performers themselves used the term *starina* (something that is old).<sup>2</sup>

### Performers and Performance:

By the time *byliny* were collected, peasants in the Northern Russia were the only ones still performing *byliny*; however, there is some evidence that earlier, *skomorokhi* (travelling minstrels) and *kaliki perekhozhiye* (religious pilgrims) were also performers of *byliny*.

While the recorded *byliny* were sung without music; it is probable that the earlier performances were accompanied by *gusli*, a traditional Russian instrument, and the collection of Kirsha Danilov also has some arrangements for a violin.<sup>3</sup>

### Origins and interpretation:

The Russian and Soviet scholarship went through several theories of the origins of *byliny*, depending on the dominant ideology of the time. The origins were first ascribed to either the aristocracy, or to the travelling minstrels (*skomorokhi*). In Soviet times, the theories about the aristocratic origins of *byliny* were unpopular, and it was posited that the peasants, who were the primary sources of the collected songs, were also their authors. However, the analysis of the songs indicates that the primary pastimes of its heroes (war and hunting) and their honor and moral codes were more similar to the early Russian feudal lords; therefore, it is more likely that they originated in the aristocratic circles, from 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> c. The authors were probably court minstrels, who may have come from different social classes.<sup>4</sup>

There were many attempts to tie together *byliny* and early Russian history, however, even though some main characters bear the names of the known historical figures, most likely, the historical events were layered on the existing epic artistic tradition.<sup>5</sup>

### Historical background

**Kievan state** was founded in the late ninth century, by the Slavic tribes or the Varangian princes (the "Norman" theory – about founding of Kiev by Scandinavians/Varangians was very much disputed in

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Soviet scholarship). Was ruled by a prince (*kniaz*'), and warrior aristocracy. Accepted Christianity in 988 CE, under Grand Prince Vladimir I (ruled 978-1015). The Golden Age of Kievan Rus lasted from 1019 to 1054 under Yaroslav the Wise. Later the state became more decentralized. Kievan Rus ended with capture of Kiev by Mongols (Tatars) in 1240 by Batu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan.<sup>6</sup>

### **Novgorod**

“Great Lord Novgorod” was a large river port and trading city with access to White, Caspian, and Baltic seas, and trade relations with Hanseatic League cities in the 13<sup>th</sup> c. Was ruled by a merchant oligarchy and an assembly called *veche*. Was threatened by Sweden and Teutonic Order until their defeat by Alexander Nevsky in 1240 and 1242, respectively.<sup>7</sup>

### **Cycles and main characters:**

Bylinas are usually divided into three cycles, based on the themes and main characters.

### **Mythological Cycle**

Deals with themes prior to the founding of the Kievan state, has very epic, larger-than-life characters, the events are not tied to a definite historical setting.

*Volkh (or Volga) Vseslavyevich* - the only magic user in the epic tales. His name means wizard or sorcerer, derived from *volkhv*. His mother was a human, and his father was a serpent. He is regarded as one of the oldest characters in Russian epics.

The most popular Volkh story describes his conquest of the Indian Kingdom.

Some attempts were made to connect him to Prince Vseslav of Polock (1044-1101), who, according to the *Lavrent'evskiy Chronicle* and the *Tale of Igor's Campaign*, was a shape-shifter and a werewolf.<sup>8</sup>

*Svyatogor* (“*Holy Mountain*”) – a *bogatyir* of immense strength and size, living in faraway mountains. Never does anything really heroic. In two most frequently recorded songs, he meets Ilya Muromets, and after a brief journey and, perhaps, some adventures in the Holy Mountains, Svyatogor dies either by trying to lift the “weight of the Earth”, or by laying into a coffin, which conveniently happens to be just his size. In some versions of the stories he imparts part of this immense unnatural strength to Ilya Muromets before his death.

*Mikula* – peasant and a ploughman, whose plough is so heavy that Volga/Volkh (see above) can't move it. Sometimes Mikula keeps the weight of the Earth in a little bag (or a lunch bag), which mighty warriors are unable to lift.

### **Kievan cycle**

Describes the deeds and adventures of *bogatyri* (plural of *bogatyir*, epic heroes, prob. related to Persian *bogadur* or Mongolian *baator*), at the court of Prince Vladimir. Prince Vladimir's court serves as a rough framework narrative device, similar to the court of King Arthur.

*Prince Vladimir Little Red Sun* - Composite figure, most likely based on Vladimir I, Vladimir Monomakh and Vladimir Yaroslavich (X-XI centuries). A secondary character present in a large number of songs. He hosts feasts, rules Kiev, and gives *bogatyri* their tasks and rewards. Can be unfair, cowardly, and pig-headed.

*Ilya Muromets*- the most popular and most heroic figure of byliny. He was either a peasant or, probably in later versions, a cossack, paralyzed until he was 30 or 33, and was cured by *kaliki pereknozhie* (travelling pilgrims). Became a *bogatyir* in service to Kiev and Vladimir. The most popular tales are: *Ilya Muromets and Nightingale the Robber*, *Ilya Muromets and Kalin Tsar*, *Three Journeys of Ilya Muromets*, *Ilya Muromets and Idolishche*.

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He is claimed to be a historical figure, and was canonized as a saint. His body is supposedly on display in *Kievo-Pecherskaya Lavra* (underground monastery in Kiev). The songs about Ilya were recorded in early 1800, but in 1574 he is mentioned in a letter by Kmita Chernobylski, a village elder, and in 1594, by Erich Lassota, a German traveler, who claims to have seen his grave. Curiously, he is also mentioned in *Tidrek* saga, recorded in Norway in 1250, where he is called Ilias von Riuczen, and in Lombardian saga, *Ortnit*, as Eliasz von Reuzzen.<sup>9</sup>

*Dobrynya Nikitich* – An important character, usually of noble birth, portrayed as chivalrous and well educated. There are numerous songs about Dobrynya, most popular one is *Dobrynya Nikitich i Zmey Gorynich* (or Dragon) in which he defeats a dragon, and frees Vladimir's niece, Zabava Putyatichna. Historic Dobrynya was an uncle of Prince Vladimir who was spreading Christianity “with sword and fire” in Novgorod and Rostov, together with Putyata, Vladimir's commander in 991.<sup>10</sup>

*Alyosha Popovich* is the youngest of the three great bogatyrs. He is a son of a priest. (Russian Orthodox priests were allowed to marry, so this is not at all unusual.) He is clever, smart, and more of a trickster figure. Unlike Dobrynya, he is sometimes portrayed with negative traits. Most famous song is *Alesha and Tugarin Zmeevich*. Tugarin is sometimes identified with historical Tugor-khan, who attacked Pereiaslavl and was killed on 7/19/1096.

There were some attempts to tie him to the historic Aleksander (Alyosha) Popovich of Rostov, switched allegiance to Kiev, after refusing to participate in local wars and died in the battle with Mongols on Kalka River in 1224.<sup>11</sup>

*Stavr Godinovich* - great Novgorod merchant traveling to Kiev, and imprisoned by Vladimir, jealous of his wealth. Vasilisa, his wife, disguises herself as a Mongol or Lithuanian envoy and saves Stavr from Vladimir's dungeons by trickery. Incidentally, in 1118, a Novgorod commander by the name of Stavr, angered Vladimir Monomakh, and was seized and imprisoned in Kiev.

*Zabava Putyatichna* - most often is portrayed as Vladimir's niece, who is either married off to other characters, or is kidnapped by a dragon. Sometimes is linked to a daughter of historical figure, Putyata, ruthless commander of Vladimir's I, of whom the chronicles say that he “spread Christianity in Novgorod with a sword”.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Zabava is often ridiculed for being a woman, but is the only one who sees through trickery and deception. She is the only one who recognizes Vasilisa (from the previous paragraph) in drag as a woman.

*Princess Apraksiya* - Vladimir's daughter, niece, or wife, or may be a relative of another main character, depending on a song.

### **Novgorod cycle**

*Sadko* – a gusli player and a Novgorod merchant, the only character to make a journey to the underworld and come back. After his many adventures and a safe arrival to Novgorod, he takes a vow to build a church. No direct historical parallels to Sadko exist, but the song is full of historical details about Novgorod. However, a note in a Novgorod chronicle mentions one Sadko Sytinets, who in 1167 founded a “stone church to Martyrs Boris and Gleb”, patron saints of sailors. The church was consecrated in 1173, and demolished in 1682.<sup>13</sup>

During the Soviet times, the heroic epic stories with strong national themes were popularized<sup>14</sup>, but buliny type stories also included a large number of religious or biblical songs, satire, tall tale type songs, and *fablieu* (low comedy/sexual songs).

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## Structure

Bylina, even though now known primarily in printed form, is a form of oral performance, and thus has several devices facilitating oral performance and comprehension. It is pretty formulaic, and has standard types beginnings and endings:

**Zapev**- an epic interlude, may start a song, has nothing to do with the plot of the song, and is pretty generic, can be applied to many different bylinas.<sup>15</sup>

**Zachin** – A generic start, usually deals with the setting, a common *zachin* describes the feast in the palace of Prince Vladimir. (Same *zachin* can be used in several bylinas.)<sup>16</sup>

**Kontsovka** – a short formulaic end, a signifier that the song is done.<sup>17</sup> May invoke a blessing, a wish for good weather or a good fortune.

It is linear, without subplots, flashbacks, or secondary plots.

It shares great number of motifs with other oral folklore forms, such as fairy tales and legends, and other epic stories, which are not necessarily unique to Russian folklore.

It usually consists of a single episodes. The composite epics, which contain several adventures are more rare.

Some elements/devices are common in *byliny*<sup>18</sup>:

*Slavic negative antithesis*- a negative form of comparison: “a bright falcon didn’t swoop down on the geese... Russian bogatyr swooped down on the Tatar army”, etc. several negative antitheses can be strung together for more epic effect.

*Adding style* – passages which line by line describe something in simple sentences something that could be easily summed up with one phrase.

*Epic hyperbole* – claims of extraordinarily heavy weapons, superfast horses, listing unbelievable numbers talking about armies or riches.

*Tag lines* – signifiers to the audience about a change in the song. For example, the common “hail to you...” indicated that the speech will be addresses to someone.

*Formulaic epithet-noun phrases*- repetitious descriptive epithets that persist from song to song, some are specific to byliny, some also encountered in other forms of folklore. Examples: mother damp earth, bright falcon, Saracen Mountains, Circassian saddle, green Moroccan leather boots, etc.

### **Glossary of common *bylina* terms:**

*Bogatyr* – Russian word for a hero/warrior

*Aurochs*- Large European wild ox, extinct since 16<sup>th</sup> century

*Boyar* – aristocracy member in Kievan Rus

*Druzhina* – a warrior prince's retinue

*Gusli* – an old stringed musical instrument, which was plucked

*Kaliki perekhozhie* – wandering religious pilgrims

*Voyevoda* – an old term for a general

*Yarlyk* – a Tatar document granting governing privileges to Russian princes

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<sup>1</sup> James Bailey and T. G. Ivanova, *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, Folklores and Folk Cultures of Eastern Europe (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998)., xvi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xxx.

<sup>4</sup> Felix J Oinas, "The Problem of the Aristocratic Origin of Russian Byliny," *Slavic Review* (1971)., 513-522.

<sup>5</sup> V. Ia. Propp, *Russkiy Geroicheskiy Epos* (Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1955).

<sup>6</sup> Bailey and Ivanova, *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics.*, xviii-xix.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii-xix.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Wasyl Jaszczun, *Vybrane Iz Slavistyky*, Zapysky Naukovoho Tovarystva Im Shevchenka Filolohichna Sektsiia (New York: Nauk. t-vo im. Shevchenka, 1991)., 291.

<sup>10</sup> B. A. Rybakov and B. A. Rybakov, *Iazychestvo Drevney Rusi* (Moskva: "Nauka", 1987).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Ziolkowski, *Soviet Heroic Poetry in Context : Folklore or Fakelore* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013)., 127.

<sup>15</sup> Bailey and Ivanova, *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics.*, xxiv.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv-xxvii.

## Other helpful resources:

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From the website of Liudmila Vladimirova, of Caid (<http://www.sca-russian.com/>) :

<http://www.sca-russian.com/stavr.doc> - a translation and documentation of the bylina about Stavr Godinovich, with a very helpful bibliography.

<http://www.sca-russian.com/poetry.html> - poems about SCA fighters done in Russian epic style.

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