

An Introduction to Russian Folk Demonology

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For the purposes of this class, folk demonology refers to belief in a host of supernatural powerful beings, not sanctioned by dominant religion (orthodox Christianity in this case), but persisting side by side with the official religion.

The three Eastern Slavic languages had split relatively late, in 14-15th centuries, so the demonology and folk beliefs among eastern Slavs (Russians, Ukrainian, and Belorussians) are pretty similar.¹

Folk demonology reflects remnants of ancient cosmology, pagan god worship, cults of ancestors and the spirit world.

The world was divided in three layers – sky/heavens, earth, and underworld, and in two parallel worlds, the world of the living humans, and world of the spirits, which is also the world of the dead. (curiously, the words for the “other world” in Russian are “zagrobnyy mir” or “the world beyond the coffin”)

In Russian, the word for world and light is the same (“svet”), so we have “this world” or “etot svet” where we live, and “that world”, or “tot svet” where are the ancestors, ghosts, spirits, demons, etc.

The demons and spirits do not appear just because and are confined to specific places, such as houses, barns, meadows, forests, etc. and times. Generally, the summer and winter solstice were the times of increased spirit activity.

“Clean” places, like churches, were less likely and “unclean” places, like locations of suicides were more likely to have demons and spirits. A generic term “unclean force” (nechistaya sila) was used to describe all the demons and spirits and their manifestations. While each demonic being had their own times of peak activity, the unclean force in general was active during the darkest time of the year.²

After the advent of Christianity on the territory of the Kievan Rus in 9-10th century, the worship of pagan gods was persecuted, but propitiation and beliefs into demons and spirits persisted in parallel with Christianity, despite the threats and complaints from the

¹ Yelena Levkিয়েvskaya, *V Krayu Domovykh I Leshikh* (Moscow: OGI, 2013)., 15.

² Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1989)., 45.

church. This dual belief system is referred to as “dvoyeveriye”, and some of it persists to this day.³

Overall, the borders between the worlds are porous and leaky, and the otherworldly beings keep interfering in human lives. Many of the demon characters can be traced to ancestral cult beliefs. Here, the “clean” dead, the relatives who lived a good life and died a good death, will become protecting and caring spirits, and the “unclean” dead, who lived a bad life or died a bad death or both, will be malevolent and nasty.

Generally, the closer the spirit to the house or homestead, the nicer it is to humans, and the farther the nastier.

There are several rough subsets:

Domain spirits – tied to a building of a typical Russian homestead

Spirit associated with a topographical feature – forest, lake, field, etc.

Spirits beings not tied to a territory

Spirits of people or former people - Rusalki, vampires, changeling, koldun, vedma , etc.

Domovoy - Protective house spirit of the family and homestead, believed to be a spirit of a dead ancestor. Is connected to a specific family. Takes care of household tasks, helps maintain order and well being in the domicile, and likes to live in the basement or in or behind the stove. It’s treated more like a family member than a demon, and if the Domovoy is angry, can’t be gotten rid of with crosses or prayer. If a family moves, the domovoy is asked to come along, although he may choose not to. The family who lost its domovoy usually loses its luck and financial prosperity.

We have no images of domovoys, although it is thought that the wooden household idols, such as found on excavations of medieval Novgorod, were related to this belief. He is imagined as a short very old man with a very long grey beard, although he can change shape and look like anyone. Occasionally a domovoy may have had a wife.

To maintain a good relationship, one needs to respect him and feed him regularly.

A Domovoy also oversees the cattle and, especially horses. If a domovoy didn’t like a specific horse, the family would have to sell it. If he liked a horse, he would braid its mane.

The word “domovoy” was first recorded in the 17th century, however, a character with the same characteristics, was described in the 12th and early 15th centuries.⁴

³ B. A. Rybakov, *Iazychestvo Drevnikh Slavian* (Moskva: Izd-vo "Nauka, 1981).

⁴ Levkিয়েvskaya, *V Krayu Domovykh I Leshikh.*, 45.

Kikimora - a malevolent female household spirit, specifically interfering with fiber arts – spinning and sewing. Imagined as a small woman or a little girl, who will also made noise and was a general nuisance. The word “kikimora” is thought to come from the old roots for crooked and death, and is associated with places where a bad death took place, or where there is a buried body, especially of a non baptized infant. Occasionally it predicts the future. Kikimoras don’t like stones with holes in them, and hawthorn branches.

Bannik – spirit of the bathhouse. Bathhouse is traditionally an “unclean” place, no icons were placed there, and no crosses. One can’t take a bath at night, and especially at midnight – that’s the time when the devils bathe. If you go to the bathhouse at night, a bannik, who looks like an old dark man with a long beard and fiery eyes, will bathe you to death. Bannik killed people by drowning, heat exhaustion, or by flaying them. Like a domovoy, he was also a shape shifter. Other bathhouse prohibitions include: not using the baths on church holidays, and from Christmas to epiphany, can’t be the last person to bathe alone (company is safer).

The last person out of the bathhouse should leave a bannik some water and soap and invite him to bathe. The bathers need to ask a bannik’s permission to use the bathhouse, then they’re under his protection.

Bannitza - a female bathhouse spirit, also called obderikha, or the flayer. A Bannitza has long hair and big teeth, the beliefs are otherwise similar to Banninki. An obderikha appears in the bathhouse after a newborn is given his first bath. (Bathhouse was the standard place to give birth)

Ovinnik – spirit of ovin, or the building where the harvested wheat was dried. Initially, it was a building with a pit under the floor, where a fire was kept. Later, it was a place with a big oven where the sheaves of grain were placed on the ceiling beams and dried. As late as the 16th c. there were records of fire worship in ovin.⁵ Ovinnik was supposed to be very helpful, taking care of the grain, and assist with its threshing. It could also protect against vampires and against bannik. If angered, he could set fire to the ovin, or burn the people working there. It is bad luck to sleep in the ovin at night, without asking permission first. Ovinnik needs to be thanked at the end of the season. If you see ovinnik, you can’t cross yourself, otherwise he will set fire to the homestead.

Ovinnitza - a female ovin spirit. Lives by the fire, occasionally is seen outside in the fields.

Gumennik – spirit of gumno, a place where the sheaves of grain are stored next to the field. Similar to ovinnik, may punish people by setting the harvest on fire, but can also protect people from vampires.

⁵ Ibid., 65.

Rizhnik – spirit of the threshing barn, scary black skinned black haired man with fiery eyes, also seen as a black shaggy dog.

Ambarnik – spirit of ambar, the storage barn. Not nice to people and can kill them, if they visit the barn when he doesn't like it.

Leshiy - the forest spirit. Master of the forest, who could lead people astray by shape shifting into familiar people or animals. Wearing things backwards or inside out offers some protection. Rarely kills outright, punishes people for breaking the rules of proper behavior in the forest – cutting down too much wood, hunting too many animals, not putting out fires. If one answers a call or mocks an echo in the forest it can summon a leshiy. Whistling in the forest is also a taboo. Interestingly, leshiy has many similarities with the devils, but as a “domain” spirit, could actually protect people from them.

A Leshiy is a shapeshifter. If he looks human, he will be dressed as a peasant except for the fastenings of the clothing, which will be reversed. He may not wear a belt and does not have a shadow, (usually, but there are always exceptions). Can change size at will.

Leshiy like characters, though described as devils, are mentioned in the 15-17th centuries Russian hagiographies.⁶

Hunters had to follow special rules – not to take too many animals, ask permission to hunt, and ask permission to stay in forest hunting cabins. Otherwise, leshiy will not let them sleep, will put out their fires, and so on.

Shepherds who had to take their cattle to forest pastures, had to deal with him as well. Really brave ones could make deals with the leshiy to take care of their cattle for the season. In return they would not eat certain things, give up certain habits (like climbing fences) or give up shaving and cutting hair. (Somewhat similar to the deal a soldier makes with the devil, in “Bearskin”, a brothers Grimm tale).⁷

Leshiy would pick up cursed children ‘may the leshiy take you!’ or “go to leshiy!” are still used today. To get them back, parents needed to make a food offering at cross roads by the forest.

Also, if parents sent their children to the forest for something – kindling, mushrooms, etc, they had to make a small offering, and ask a leshiy to let the kids go back home. Leshiys are not active in the winter.

⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁷ Ibid., 87.

Vodyanoy – water spirit. Each body of water had one. A vodyanoy is even closer to the devil, and is more hostile towards humans. It will actually lure people in to the water, pretending to be a duck, a fish, etc, and drown them. People who have to deal with a vodyanoy, (such as sailors and fishermen), gave him offerings. In April, once the ice melted, a vodyanoy would get a horse sacrifice (similar to Nicholas the miracle worker, who would also get a horse offering, as horses are connected to water – see similar beliefs in Irish and Greek mythologies). A vodyanoy had really good milk cows, which could be stolen. He could also appear as a fish, as a green man covered in seaweed, or a drowned corpse. There is a 17th century account of a water spirit trying to drown people.⁸ Swimmers should ask a vodyanoy permission to take a swim, otherwise they could drown.

Millers, who are considered similar to sorcerers, are thought to have a great relationship with a vodyanoy, and gave him offerings. For example, a horse skull would be buried at the foundation of each new water mill.

Bolotnik – a swamp spirit. Sits in the bottom of the swamp and drowns people. A bolotnik took the form of a fat eyeless man covered in mud, or a man covered in gray hair, with long arms and a tail.

Polevoy (also called **mezhevik**)– spirit of the fields, tall man dressed in white. At midnight and noon he drove a three horse carriage along the field dividers and the roads bordering the fields, if people are sleeping or sitting there, he will crush them. Each field has one. He was also responsible for all the grains and good harvest. His appearance coincides with a sudden gust of wind. He is a shapeshifter, like a leshiy and is also responsible for the pastures and cattle. A Polevoy can lure people into ravines or pits and to die, and can also give one sun poisoning or sun stroke. He could be propitiated, like a leshiy, with a stolen rooster and some eggs. The last handful of grains was left in the field for him. Some say he invented beer.

Poludnitza – midday spirit – woman dressed in white. A Poludnitza punishes those who violate the taboo of cutting grain at midday by breaking and twisting their necks. She could be distracted by stories, and could tickle people to death (similar to **rusalki**). She appears when the rye flowers – similar to other dead beings. She can protect the fields or damage them. She punished those who walk through the fields. Poludnitzas may be a remnant of a solar deity.

Rusalka – somewhat similar to mermaids, look like regular women but naked with long loose hair. Women who died before getting married or cursed and unbaptized children were thought to become rusalki. (the more familiar mermaids with fishtails, are thought to be drowned pharaoh's daughters, who became rusalki.)

⁸ Ibid., 103.

The name comes from the roman *Rosalia* holiday, which was dedicated to the spirits of the dead, and was celebrated when roses started to bloom . Rusalka live by water – lakes, ponds, water mills, wells. They brushed their hair, bathed, and occasionally did laundry.

They were especially dangerous when the rye flowered, and during the Rusalnaya week, which is sixth week after Easter, when they were very active and visible to people.⁹

Rusalki are always hostile to people, and were most commonly active from late spring to summer solstice. During this time they were more likely to wonder through the forest or fields and kill people by tickling them to death.

To repel rusalki, the defender needed to draw a circle around themselves on the ground, and make the sign of the cross. A defender could also ride a poker, which would trick the rusalki into thinking they were a witch. Rusalki didn't like witches and were supposed to run away. Defenders could also beat them away with a laundry roller, or tell them how many times a harrow has.¹⁰

Shulikun – Christmas demons, from northern Russia, that always appeared in groups. They live under water, and have pointy metal hats. These hats were used to cut through the ice and get out. They were supposed to prank holiday revelers, and the nastier ones would drag people to lakes and drown them under the ice. They get kicked out with celebrations and masses before lent.

The devil – has very little to do with the biblical Satan, and is a generic bad guy. The devil has no redeeming qualities whatsoever. First he was a literary character, then merged with a multitude of folklore characters and became quite popular. The devil “chert” likes making treaties and deals with people, usually for power and riches in exchange for their souls. Those serving or being assisted by the devil can't wash, clean themselves, shave, or cut their nails or hair.¹¹ The devils may pretend to be carriage drivers, take hitchhikers, bring them to the wrong places and drop them off. They also hire wedding singers and musicians to play for them. They don't like holy water, prayer, or the name of god.

Cursed children – children cursed by their parents (on purpose or inadvertently), or promised to a demon, like in fairy tales. They disappear, and complex rituals are needed

⁹ D. K. Zelenin, Tolstoy Nikita, and E. E. Levkieskaya, *Essays on Russian Mythology : People Who Met a Violent Death and Mermaids : Selected Works (Ocherki Russkoy Mifologii: Umershie Neestestvennoi Smertyu I Rusalki: Isbrannyye Trudy)*, Traditsionnaia Dukhovnaia Kultura Slavian (Moskva: "INDRIK", 1995), 159.

¹⁰ Ibid., 159.

¹¹ Levkieskaya, *V Krayu Domovykh I Leshikh*.

to bring them back. If they die, they are at risk of becoming revenants, vampires or rusalki. Sometimes, they never die, and exist between the worlds until the curse is removed. The curses were more potent at certain times of day and night.¹²

Occasionally, such children are replaced by changelings. (called “obmen” or “obmenysh”)

Werewolf or shapeshifter (oboroten’) – usually a man, who took the shape of a wolf, most often to harm others. A werewolf looks like a wolf, but may have a human shadow. Witches and sorcerers turn into wolves to harm people and to steal livestock. Sometimes witches or evil sorcerers turn others into wolves.

In *Slovo o polku Igoreve*, written in 1180, prince Vseslav would turn into wolf at night at travel at great speeds. Some thirteenth century chronicles describe how werewolves eat sun and the moon during the eclipses.

To affect the change, one must do a flip or a tumble over 3, 6, or 9 knives stuck into a tree stump. (or over the fence, etc.).¹³

To turn a cursed werewolf back to human, one must cut off his skin, and/or feed him human food that has been blessed or crossed.

Revenants. People who come back from the dead, can be triggered by any unfinished business, debts, breastfeeding, stolen goods, untold or told secrets, broken burial rituals, etc. Occasionally dead people come back because they need something – clothing, food, etc. This could be brought to the grave, but could also be “sent” with another dead body. After the dead are buried, they will give the items to the recipient.

Dead spouses that come back are very dangerous to the living – the living become sick, and can die too. To get rid of the revenant, one can fake violating a taboo, and when questioned by the dead, call out that that’s just as reasonable as the dead man walking.

The most dangerous ones are suicides, or “bad death” victims.

Koldun – sorcerer, or powerful person, capable of good and bad deeds. The concept of Koldun might be a carry over of pre Christian priests or volkhvy, who had gifts of prophecy and sorcery. A koldun could be born like that, or get powers after making a deal with the devil. Occasionally, to have magical powers it was thought you have to

¹² Ibid., 170.

¹³ W. F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight : An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia*, Magic in History (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999)., 77-78.

have all your teeth and never cut your nails. Certain professionals, like millers, and smiths, and occasionally musicians, were more likely to be kolduns. They were feared and respected, and were invited to weddings, in a place of honor (best man). If not invited, the koldun could curse the wedding and the couple. Kolduns had to be respected and treated nicely, but, could be killed with a bullet made of a melted down cross.¹⁴

Ved'ma – witch and a shapeshifter, takes any appearance, can be a person, animal or a thing. A Ved'ma steals milk from cattle, pranks people, and is an overall nuisance. Occasionally Ved'ma are witches that fly around – this is more common in Ukrainian folklore. Just like with kolduns, these witches could be “born”, or “learned”. The learned witches are more malevolent, and there is an overlap between the learned witches and malevolent revenants.¹⁵

Fevers – personifications of diseases, seven, twelve, forty, forty seven, or seventy seven evil women, usually daughters or sisters of king Herod, and occasionally also identified as rusalki. Fevers were supposed to come and cause all kinds of illnesses. They may look like women, but could turn into wind, flies or moths. Fevers usually had descriptive names, after the symptoms of diseases. They are not characters of folk demonology per se, but are consistently mentioned in the texts of folk spells, and protective prayers, so are worth including here.¹⁶

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¹⁴ Ibid., 77.

¹⁵ А. Ропомарев, Косміна, Т., Воруак, О. (А. П. Пономарьов, Т. В. Косміна, О. О. Борьяк.), *Ukrainians: Folk Beliefs, Supersitions, Demonology. (Українці: Народні Вірування, Повір'я, Демонологія)* Пам'ятки Історичної Думки України (Либідь, 1992)., 430-497.

¹⁶ Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight : An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia*. 244-250.

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