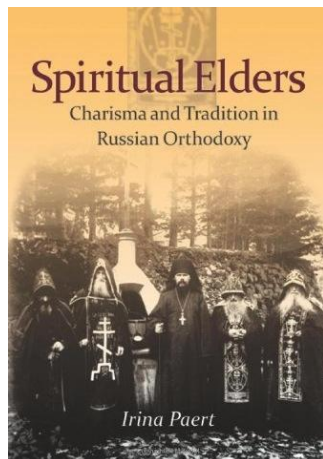


Irina Paert



# Spiritual Elders. Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy

*Estonian Institute of Humanities. DeKalb, Illinois:  
Northern Illinois University Press, 2010, pp. xiii + 286,  
ISBN 978-0-87580-410-1. US\$43.00, £38.50.*

*Reviewed by Richard J. Mammana, Jr.*

In *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy*, Irina Paert examines the essential phenomenon of spiritual eldership or *starchestvo* in Russian-speaking Orthodox life. Her primary innovation in this field – which in English has generally been known to scholars through biography, hagiography and spiritual/devotional literature – is the application of Max Weber’s categories of charisma and bureaucracy to *starchestvo*. While noting that a simple comparison of “the noninstitutionalized authority of a *starets* with the formal-instrumental rationality of the Holy Synod” and related bodies is not sufficient in light of the complex relations of various kinds of spiritual authority, Paert nevertheless

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works with these broad categories in her examination of *startsy*-focused spirituality in Russian popular religion (9).

The six chapters that form the core of this book follow *starchestvo* through a roughly chronological path, beginning with the coalescence of an identifiable Hesychast tradition of eldership in the late Byzantine period and especially in the eastern Balkans under the Ottomans. The focus here is naturally on the religious leadership of the seminal figure Paisii Velichkovskii (1722-1794) in whose influence on Athos as well as in Moldavia, Wallachia and the Ukraine Paert identifies “the Balkan revival” and “the Moldavian experiment” in spiritual eldership (41).

Chapter Two on “Monasticism and Elders between Reform and Revival, 1721-1801” charts what Paert calls “the reemergence of spiritual eldership [...] in a period marked by anti-monastic reforms, secularization, and rationalism” (41). Here, she finds particularly interesting threads of mutual influence between Old Believers and Hesychast elders in post-Petrine Russia. She also looks in detail at four significant sources of influence upon the revival of eldership in this period: the anchoritic movement within established monastic settings, religious dissent (including but not limited to Old Belief), the return to Russia of monastic travelers to Balkan communities, and the extraordinary growth of women’s communities.

Next is a particularly rich chapter entitled “Appropriating the Elders: Elders and Political Crisis in Late Imperial Russia, 1890s-1917” (140-178). This includes careful treatment of two important episodes: the glorification of Serafim of Sarov in 1903, and the imperial government’s involvement in the suppression of the *Imiaslavie* (Name of God) affair c. 1912-1914. Although both topics have been reviewed in English before (the former by Robert Nichols and the latter by Loren Graham and Jean-Michel Kantor), Paert situates both official interactions with Orthodox spiritual life in the context of their influence on spiritual eldership. She is adept here at integrating press reports, theological materials, manuscripts, and official accounts into a cohesive and multifaceted pair of narratives.

The last chapter on “The Legacy of the Elders after the Revolution, 1917-2000” follows the charismatic institution of eldership through periods of Soviet persecution and survival in the Russian diaspora. The author looks here at eldership in the c. 50 Orthodox monasteries of Russian language and tradition that found themselves in new political conditions as a result of border changes in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Finland, independent Ukraine, and of course Romania. Paert also examines the ongoing legacies of figures such as Alexander Men’, Dmitrii Dudko, Vsevolod Shpiller and others who redefined the role of charismatic spiritual eldership in late Soviet society.

There are some slight missteps in the use of idiomatic English in the text, as well as some typographical errors that could have been avoided by the employment of a careful proofreader. These small matters do not distract, however, from a significant achievement by an important scholar whose work illuminates the Russian religious past in fresh ways, all the while outlining promising new directions in the examination of *starchestvo*. Paert notes that “the revival of eldership in contemporary Russia is a subject that merits a separate study” (213). One hopes that her careful attention to a wide variety of sources as evidenced in this volume may be brought to bear on this potentially fruitful period as well.