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Skomorokhi: The Russian Minstrel-Entertainers

Numerous sources, both secular and ecclesiastical, attest to the widespread popularity in Kievan Rus' and Muscovite Russia of the professional minstrel-entertainers known as *skomorokhi*.¹ To the folklorist these curious jacks-of-all-trades, reminiscent of the French *jongleurs* and German *Spielmänner*, have become identified primarily with the singing, composing, and eventual transmission to the peasants of the north of heroic tales and historical songs (*byliny* and *istoricheskie pesni*). To the sociocultural historian the *skomorokhi* represent both a preliminary or formative stage in the evolution of the Russian theater and an important chapter in the early history of secular music in Russia. But whether one views them through the eyes of the folklorist or the historian there is little doubt that these *veselye ljudi* or *veselye molodtsy*, as they were sometimes referred to, played an important role in the social and cultural life of the Eastern Slavs from the eleventh through the seventeenth century. This essay attempts to trace the history of the *skomorokhi* from their somewhat obscure origins in Kievan Rus' to their formal and official proscription by Tsar Aleksei in 1648 and to evaluate briefly their ultimate importance to Russian music, theater, and folk literature.

When we first encounter the *skomorokhi* in eleventh-century historical sources they emerge as an already established, if not universally accepted, institution in the social life of the Kievan Slavs. An entry for the year 1068 in the Laurentian Text of the *Povest' vremennykh let* reads: "With these [i.e., pagan practices and superstitions] and other devices the devil deceives us, with all manner of enticements he draws us away from God, with trumpets and *skomorokhi*, *gusli*, and *rusalii*."² Fedosii Pechersky, in a *Pouchenie* dating

1. The only book-length study of the *skomorokhi* is A. S. Famintsyn's *Skomorokhi na Rusi* (St. Petersburg, 1889). An excellent shorter treatment of the subject can be found in N. F. Findeizen's *Ocherki po istorii muzyki v Rossii*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1928–29), 1:145–70. A good discussion of the *skomorokhi* in English appears in H. M. Chadwick and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, vol. 2, pt. 1: *Russian Oral Literature* (Cambridge, 1936), pp. 261–69.

2. *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisei* (hereafter cited as *PSRL*), vol. 1: I. II. *Lavrentievskaiia i troitskaiia letopisi* (St. Petersburg, 1846), p. 73.

The *gusli* is a stringed musical instrument, either oval or triangular in shape, and is best described as a horizontal harp. The *gudok* (a somewhat cruder and smaller

from this same period, denounces the skomorokhi in identical terms and includes them in his list of evils to be shunned by the good Christian.³ The author of the Chronicle of Pereiaslavl-Suzdal makes two passing references to the skomorokhi. In the first of these he upbraids the Scythians for wearing Latin dress, or the *krotopolie* (knee-length girded tunic), which he likens to the costume of the skomorokhi.⁴ In the second he describes a famine in Rostov in 1070, which he says was somewhat aggravated by the appearance in the town at that particular time of *volkhvy*, pagan priests or magicians who, among other things, are said to have engaged in sorcery “in the fashion of the skomorokhi” (p. 91). Though somewhat terse and general, these early references to the skomorokhi allow one to draw the following tentative conclusions: the Kievan clergy very early adopted a stern and negative attitude toward the activities of the skomorokhi; in their dress they stood out conspicuously from most of the native population, and they enjoyed a widespread reputation as sorcerers.

Unfortunately these early chronicle references contain no clues to the origin of the skomorokhi, thus prompting scholars to devise theories of their own to explain the appearance of the minstrel-entertainers in Kievan Rus'. With few exceptions they have focused primarily on the etymology of the word *skomorokh* itself and have inevitably sought foreign roots for both the name and the institution.⁵ In the late nineteenth century A. Sobolevsky for the first time suggested that rather than continue to engage in futile etymological speculation his colleagues should turn their attention to such traditional survivals of old Russian culture as the *Maslenitsa*, or pre-Lenten spring festival, in which originally the skomorokhi and later their spiritual successors played such an important role even as late as the nineteenth century.⁶ It is here, according to Sobolevsky, that the origins of the skomorokhi lie.

The *Maslenitsa*, however, was only one of several festival periods that highlighted the calendar year of both pre-Christian and Christian Slavs. Their daily life, rooted primarily in agriculture, was intimately bound up with seasonal events steeped in custom and ritual. Every calendar year was begun,

version of the cello) and the *gusli* eventually became identified as the traditional instruments of the skomorokhi. In eleventh-century sources, however, the term *gusli* was frequently used to describe any stringed musical instrument. See A. S. Famintsyn, *Gusli: Russkii narodnyi muzykal'nyi instrument* (St. Petersburg, 1890), pp. 5–6.

3. Feodosii Pechersky, *Sochineniia*, in *Uchenyia zapiski vtorago otdeleniia Imperatorskoi akademii nauk*, bk. 2, no. 2, ed. I. I. Sreznevsky (St. Petersburg, 1856), p. 195.

4. K. M. Obolensky, ed., *Letopisets Pereiaslavlia-Suzdal'skago* (Moscow, 1851), p. 3.

5. A good bibliographic guide to the literature on the origins of the skomorokhi can be found in Max Vasmer's *Russisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 3 (Heidelberg, 1955), pp. 643–44.

6. A. Sobolevsky, “K voprosu drevnerusskikh skomorokhakh, A. I. Kirpichnikova,” *Zhivaia starina*, 3, no. 2 (1893): 255.

accompanied, and ended with appropriate rites including music, song, and dance. In time—precisely when is not known—the “circle” or “round” dance came to dominate these rites. As this combination of song and dance became more elaborate it gave rise to the gradual evolution of solo performers—actors in a sense—who never numbered more than three in a given chorus and whose function was to act out the lyrics of the songs performed by the chorus. These actor-soloists could be considered among the forerunners of the skomorokhi.

In addition to these cyclic folk festivals there were also elaborate rites and ceremonies connected with the important events in the daily life of the individual, most notably his marriage. In time the ceremonies connected with a wedding grew into a lengthy and involved ritual that began with the match-making and ended with a great feast on the day after the nuptials. The whole was given a dramatic character with stereotyped roles for all the principals involved, especially the bride. In fact the usual way of referring to wedding rites and customs was to use the phrase “to play a wedding” (*igrat' svad'bu*).⁷ Besides providing general entertainment and music it is probable that the skomorokhi originally participated in the wedding “drama” as aides-de-camp to the groom, assisting him in the prolonged and involved negotiations to secure a bride. Eventually their participation in the matrimonial rites became so prominent that it was found necessary to denounce and prohibit such practices as allowing the skomorokhi to escort the wedding party to the church ahead of the cross-bearing priest.⁸

These then, briefly, were the indigenous factors that helped to bring to the fore a class of individuals who would eventually evolve into professional skomorokhi. The process of transformation from local tribal cult leader to professional entertainer was greatly facilitated by two circumstances: the introduction of Christianity in 988, and the influence of the Byzantine mimes and German *Spielmänner*.

Turning first to the question of foreign influence, it is possible to demonstrate with some degree of certainty that both the German *Spielmänner* and the Byzantine mimes had at one time or another visited Kievan Rus' and had exposed the Eastern Slavs to the particular brand of entertainment for which they were famous. A reference in the *Kormchaia kniga riazanskaia* of 1284 cautions the faithful against imitating or following in the footsteps of the *shpil'many*,⁹ a term obviously derived from the Middle High German word

7. Iu. M. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore* (New York, 1950), p. 212.

8. *Stoglav*, chap. 41, ques. 16.

9. In addition to the noun, the verb *shpil'maniti* and the adjective *shpil'manskyi* also occur in the same text. See I. I. Sreznevsky, *Materialy dlia slovaria drevne-russkago iazyka po pis'mennym pamiatnikom*, 3 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1893-1912; reprint, Graz, 1955-56), 3:1598.

spilman, meaning “mime,” “actor,” “dancer.”¹⁰ Scholars such as Vostokov have in fact maintained that the German *Spiel männer* or *Spielleute* made their original appearance among the Slavs as early as the tenth or eleventh century, leaving behind not only their name but something of their craft as well.¹¹

The Byzantine mimes had perhaps an even more pervasive and enduring influence on the Kievan *skomorokhi* than the *Spiel männer*. As the immediate successors of the classic Greek and Roman mimic tradition they commanded a far wider audience than their medieval German counterparts, and this assured their popularity not only in the Hippodrome but in the precincts of the imperial palace as well. Among the surviving frescoes from the Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Kiev, for example, a series of paintings decorating the walls of the staircase leading up to the prince’s private pew depicts a mimic entertainment of music, dancing, acting, and acrobatics.¹² Thus it is more than likely that along with other aspects of Byzantine culture the Kievan Slavs were also introduced to the Eastern mimes, who entertained not only at court but among the common people as well.

It was undoubtedly the close identification of the *skomorokhi* with Kiev’s pagan past which, after the introduction of Christianity as the official state religion in 988, brought about the end of one era and the beginning of another for them. For along with Byzantine Christianity, Kiev also inherited Byzantine church law with its ascetic idealism and inherent mistrust of all things worldly. One need only compare the pertinent canons dealing with entertainers and the theater from the Quinisexta or Trullan Church Council (Constantinople, 692) with those of the *Kormchaia kniga* to see the close affinity between Byzantine and Kievan church statutes.¹³ Although Byzantine rigorism and with it the enforcement of the Trullan canons had lapsed in the period following the iconoclast controversy, the church in Kievan Rus’ was bent on eradicating all vestiges of paganism and went about doing so with a zeal characteristic of the convert.

To escape the wrath of the ecclesiastical authorities the *skomorokhi* now

10. Vasmer, *Russisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3:426.

11. A. Kh. Vostokov, *Slovar’ tserkovno-slavianskago iazyka*, vol. 2, in *Materialy dlia sravnitel’nago i ob’iasnitel’nago slovaria i grammatiki*, vol. 6 (St. Petersburg, 1861), p. 576.

12. Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles* (New York, 1963), p. 159, fig. 107.

13. Canon 51 singles out mimes and theaters for censure; canon 61 condemns bear tamers; canon 62 denounces the pagan festivals of Kalends, Bota, and Brumalia. See J. D. Mansi, ed., *Sacrorum consiliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, vol. 11 (Graz, 1960), pp. 967, 970–71. In the 1282 version of the *Kormchaia kniga* from Novgorod reference is made to the Trullan canons in the introduction to the section in which bear tamers and various pagan games are condemned. See F. I. Buslaev, ed., *Istoricheskaia khrestomatiia tserkovno-slavianskago i drevne-russkago iazykov* (Moscow, 1861), pp. 380–84.

took to the road and embarked upon a new career as itinerant minstrel-entertainers. To complete this metamorphosis from traditional cult leader to professional entertainer they also found it necessary to “diversify,” that is, to incorporate new acts into their repertoire—acts which they could have easily borrowed from the foreign entertainers. Thus in addition to their continuing participation in weddings, folk festivals, and games, they now also became actors, animal tamers, jugglers, and wrestlers. It is possible that in order to break with the past even more convincingly they began to wear the costume of the visiting mimes and *Spielmänner*, who seem to have been less objectionable to the Kievan hierarchy. This last would account for the reference in the Chronicle of Pereiaslavl-Suzdal to the Latin or non-Slavic dress of the skomorokhi.

The early history of the skomorokhi and their identification with Kiev seem to end rather abruptly in the waning decades of the eleventh century. With only a few exceptions there are no further significant references to them in Kievan sources from this point on. Continued ecclesiastical censure gradually forced the skomorokhi to leave the Kievan realm and seek a new and freer life in the more tolerant atmosphere of Novgorod. This “Venice of the North,” as it has frequently been called, prided itself on its independent democratic spirit and comparative liberalism. At no time, for example, were secular music and entertainment in any way proscribed in Novgorod until the universal banning of the skomorokhi by Aleksei in 1648. An even more graphic tribute to the spirit of tolerance and open-mindedness characteristic of medieval Novgorod can be found in a number of illuminated miniatures from the early and mid-fourteenth century which depict skomorokhi in a variety of roles as performing entertainers.¹⁴ What is most unusual about these miniatures is their improbable setting—liturgical service books. They are also the earliest known pictorial representations of skomorokhi and their art.

The oldest of the miniatures date from 1323 and are found in the *Evangelie nedel'noe*, or collection of Sunday Gospels. Stasov reproduced six of the letter-figures from this early fourteenth-century manuscript. Two are in the form of the letter *P* and four the letter *B*.¹⁵ Of these six skomorokhi two are obviously animal tamers in the act of giving a performance.¹⁶ The animals they are handling are stylized versions of dogs. The other four can be described as actors—one sitting, another standing, and the two others crouched on one knee and holding an axe and a cane respectively.¹⁷ All of them are wearing

14. V. V. Stasov, *Slavianskii i vostochnyi ornament po rukopisiam drevniago i novago vremeni* (St. Petersburg, 1887), plates 65, 67, 69, 71.

15. *Ibid.*, plate 65, nos. 15, 23, and 16, 17, 24, 25, respectively.

16. *Ibid.*, nos. 15, 16.

17. *Ibid.*, nos. 17, 23, 24, 25.

costumes reminiscent of the *krotopolie* described as the standard attire of the skomorokhi in the eleventh-century Chronicle of Pereiaslavl-Suzdal. In addition several of the figures are wearing elaborate headdress.

Perhaps the most interesting and important of the Novgorod miniatures are two taken from a fourteenth-century Psalter.¹⁸ The figures represented are dressed in typical skomorokh fashion. Both are wearing elaborate head-dress and are playing *gusli*—one oval (twelve strings), the other triangular (fourteen strings). The one playing the oval *gusli* is pictured in a squatting position as if engaged in a dance of a variety best described as *vprisiadku*. These two miniatures provide us with excellent examples of Russian medieval entertainers. Together with the other fourteenth-century Novgorod miniatures they are our only source of information about the skomorokhi in this interim twilight period of Mongol domination following the collapse of the Kievan state.

By the second half of the fifteenth century the skomorokhi were beginning to make their presence felt in the Muscovite lands. Revealing in this regard is a clause in a charter granted by Prince Iurii Vasilievich of Dmitrov on January 14, 1470, to the Monastery of the Trinity and Saint Sergius (about forty-eight miles north of Moscow), which specifically prohibits skomorokhi from playing or entertaining in the villages and hamlets belonging to the monastery.¹⁹ It is significant that the very first reference to skomorokhi that one encounters in Muscovite sources is a negative one. Similar charters granted to both ecclesiastical and nonecclesiastical petitioners in the first half of the sixteenth century also evince varying degrees of antipathy toward the skomorokhi. In some of these they are forbidden to enter specified towns, villages, and hamlets.²⁰ In other instances they are allowed to enter provided they refrain from loud or boisterous entertainment.²¹ Thus although the civil authorities did not share the church's traditional contempt for the minstrel-entertainers, they were willing to grant certain communities the right not to be "entertained" by the skomorokhi against their will.

Just why such restrictive measures were sometimes deemed necessary can perhaps be seen in a passage from the *Stoglav* of 1551, which reads: "The skomorokhi wander about in distant parts in bands of up to sixty, seventy, or even one hundred men, and they forcefully take food and drink from the peasants in the villages; they steal animals from barns and engage in brigandage along the roads."²² Keeping in mind the ecclesiastical nature of

18. *Ibid.*, plate 68, nos. 19, 25.

19. *Akty sobrannye v bibliotekakh i arkhivakh rossiiskoi imperii arkhograficheskoiu ekspeditsiei Imperatorskoi akademii nauk*, vol. 1: 1294–1598 (St. Petersburg, 1836), p. 62.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 120–22, 139–41, 256–57, 267.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 153–54, 179–81, 206–7.

22. *Stoglav*, chap. 41, ques. 19.

the source of this information, one has to view both the figure “sixty to one hundred” and the alleged lawlessness of the itinerant *veselye liudi* with certain reservations. Nonetheless there is probably some truth to these charges, especially if they are interpreted against the background of the anti-skomorokh clauses in the charters cited above.

Except for the formative period of their history and association with Kievan Rus' when they were forced to take to the road to escape persecution, the skomorokhi, prior to the sixteenth century, were mainly nonitinerant. Some of them had settled in the larger towns such as Novgorod. Many others drifted away to the outlying villages and hamlets, where they became involved in agriculture and other related activities to supplement their professional earnings. During the course of the sixteenth century, however, the Russian minstrel-entertainers became much more mobile, and they began to gravitate more and more toward the major cities and towns of the Muscovite state. Even such distant cities as Kazan, for example, could boast of eight professional skomorokhi in 1565.²³ Sigismund von Herberstein, the German ambassador to Moscow in 1517 and again in 1526, when writing about the severity of the weather in the winter of 1526, made this observation: “Of course, many itinerant people who are in the habit of wandering about these regions with dancing bears were found dead along the roads.”²⁴ The reference here to itinerant people (*multi circulatores*) with dancing bears (*cum ursis ad choreas edoctis*) undoubtedly applies to the skomorokhi.

Although the Muscovite skomorokhi were, in the second half of the sixteenth century, in sight of their “golden age,” those of Novgorod were swiftly approaching the end of an era. In both instances Ivan IV proved to be the catalytic agent that determined their fate. Other factors, of course, contributed to the total eclipse of Novgorod as the traditional haven of the skomorokhi, especially the gradual ascendancy of Moscow as the new political and cultural center of Russia. It appears also that a number of local plagues in the 1560s had taken their toll of skomorokhi, and Ivan IV's Oprichnina and the devastation it brought to Novgorod in 1570 further decimated their ranks. But it was Ivan himself, with his strong and abiding interest in music and popular entertainment, who ultimately brought about the fundamental shift in the geographic center of skomorokh activity from Novgorod to Moscow, and he achieved this in rather summary fashion. In September 1572 he ordered

23. V. I. Petukhov, “Svedeniia o skomorokhakh v pistsovykh, perepisnykh i tamozhennykh knigakh XVI–XVII vv.,” *Trudy Moskovskogo istoriko-arkhivnogo instituta*, 16 (1961): 412.

24. Sigismund von Herberstein, *Rerum moscoviticarum commentarii* (Antwerp, 1557), p. 65b.

veselye liudi from Novgorod and all other nearby towns to be rounded up and, together with their bears, transported to Moscow.²⁵

In Moscow the skomorokhi were called upon by Ivan for various purposes. Most often their function was to entertain the tsar and his court. Robert Best, the interpreter for Osepp Napea, the Russian ambassador in London, described a state dinner given by the tsar at which six singers were brought in to entertain the guests during the meal.²⁶ Sir Jerome Horsey, an agent of the Russia Company in Moscow between 1575 and 1591, told of Ivan's custom of bathing daily at three in the afternoon and then solacing himself "with pleasant songs."²⁷ And when the tsar was in a particularly good humor he would have songs about the fall of Kazan and Astrakhan recited to him by skomorokhi.²⁸

In addition to using the skomorokhi widely for his public and private entertainment, Ivan also frequently took part in their amusements. Prince A. M. Kurbsky, in his biography of Ivan, mentions the skomorokhi on at least two separate occasions. In discussing the first or "good" part of Ivan's reign, Kurbsky notes that there were none of these evil hangers-on around to distract the young tsar and lead him astray.²⁹ In fact Ivan had been prevailed upon in 1551 by Metropolitan Ioasaf to include stronger strictures against the skomorokhi in the *Stoglav*. But during the second half of his reign, according to Kurbsky, Ivan gave himself up totally to loose living. He was frequently drunk, and while in that state he would don a mask and dance about with the skomorokhi.³⁰ On occasion Ivan was also known to use the skomorokhi to mock and heap scorn upon his enemies. Thus after he had brought Archbishop Pimen of Novgorod back with him to Moscow, he placed him on a white mare and had him paraded about the city in the company of performing skomorokhi.³¹

Ivan IV's successor, Fedor I, seems to have enjoyed the performances of the skomorokhi as much as Ivan, though he never took part in their merry-making.³² Michael Romanov proved an even more enthusiastic patron of the skomorokhi by making extensive use of the *poteshnaia palata*, or entertainment

25. PSRL, vol. 30: *Novgorodskaiia vtoraiia (arkhivskaia) letopis'* (Moscow, 1965), p. 189.

26. Anthony Jenkinson, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, vol. 2, ed. E. D. Morgan and C. H. Coote (London, 1886), p. 358.

27. Jerome Horsey, *The Travels of Sir Jerome Horsey*, Hakluyt Society Publications, no. 20 (London, 1856), p. 201.

28. Salomon Henning, *Lifflendische Chürlendische Chronica* (Leipzig, 1594), p. 55, as cited in Carl Stief, *Studies in the Russian Historical Song* (Copenhagen, 1953), p. 228.

29. A. M. Kurbsky, *Skazaniia kniazia Kurbskago*, pt. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1833), p. 12.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

31. Findeizen, *Ocherki*, 1:246.

32. Giles Fletcher, *Of the Russe Commonwealth* (London, 1591), pp. 142-43.

hall, where not only skomorokhi but other entertainers also performed.³³ It was during Michael's reign that the skomorokhi dared, for the first and last time, to make petitions of grievances directly to the tsar. In one such instance, recorded in May 1633, four skomorokhi belonging to Prince Ivan Shuisky and two attached to the estate of Prince Dmitrii Pozharsky complained jointly to the tsar of having been unlawfully seized and detained by the nobleman Kriukov, who also relieved them of their cumulative earnings of thirty-seven rubles.³⁴ What action, if any, was taken by the tsar on this petition is not known.

The Dutch traveler Adam Olearius has left perhaps the best and most comprehensive description of the Muscovite skomorokhi at the height of their popularity in the first half of the seventeenth century. Describing a dinner he attended in Ladoga in 1634 he wrote: "As we sat at the table, two Russians appeared with a lute and violin in order to entertain the emissaries. They played and sang about the great Sovereign and Tsar, Mikhail Fedorovich."³⁵ On another occasion Olearius witnessed the whole range of skomorokh entertainment, including a puppet show.³⁶

Even the church, during the reign of Michael Romanov, seems to have softened its traditionally strident attacks on the skomorokhi. A report on the prevailing conditions in Moscow churches issued in 1636 mentions the skomorokhi and bear tamers as partly responsible for distracting many a Muscovite Christian from his spiritual obligations.³⁷ But aside from this general statement of fact, there is no virulent condemnation of the minstrel-entertainers nor were the faithful forbidden to patronize their performances. This was, however, only the calm before the storm, for the death of Michael Romanov in 1645 ushered in a totally new and bleak era for the skomorokhi.

Michael's successor, Aleksei, was by temperament and inclination essentially different from his father. Very early in life he had come under the pervasive influence of ecclesiastical tutors who provided him with a fundamentally spiritual *Weltanschauung*. Rather than amuse himself with sundry entertainers in the *poteshnaia palata*, he preferred the outdoors and hunting as a pastime. In fact very early in his reign he banned all but the *bakhari* from the entertainment hall, and even these venerable storytellers (now more

33. I. E. Zabelin, *Istoriia russkoi zhizni*, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1912), p. 432.

34. V. A. Borisov, *Opisanie goroda Shui i ego okrestnostei* (Moscow, 1851), pp. 451-52.

35. Adam Olearius, *Vermehrte neue Beschreibung der Muscowitischen und Persischen Reyse* (Schlesswig, 1656), p. 19.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 194. An accompanying illustration (p. 193) shows the one-man puppet theater, a dancing bear with his trainer, and two musicians, one playing an oval *gusli*, the other a *gudok*. Clusters of children are shown thoroughly enjoying the spectacle.

37. *Akty*, vol. 3: 1613-1645, pp. 401-5.

accurately referred to as *kaleki*) were no longer called upon to recite secular tales, or *skazki*, but rather religious verse, or *dukhovnye stikhi*. A further indication of the basically nonworldly orientation of the first part of Aleksei's reign was his wedding in 1648. Traditionally the joyous event called for much gaiety and merrymaking at court by the *skomorokhi* and other entertainers. On this occasion, however, the entertainment was provided by several church choirs and cantors chanting religious hymns.³⁸

Aleksei's personal preferences and inclinations aside, it should be pointed out that the *skomorokhi* themselves contributed to their eventual demise. For, whereas in the early sixteenth century they had been regarded by some communities as a minor threat to the peace or a nuisance, by the mid-seventeenth century many of them had degenerated into common thieves and outlaws—an inevitable consequence of the chaos and turmoil spawned by the Time of Troubles.³⁹ The end for the *skomorokhi* came in 1648 when Aleksei issued his proclamation entitled "On the Righting of Morals and the Abolition of Superstition."⁴⁰ Addressing himself to the *voevoda* of Belgorod, but having the rest of Russia in mind as well, the tsar lashed out at all the popular pastimes and amusements that he felt were sapping the moral and religious strength of the country. The *skomorokhi*, as might be expected, were singled out in this *gramota* as perhaps the most nefarious of the evil influences diverting the Orthodox Christian from the path of virtue. They were repeatedly condemned for their satanic songs and dances, their bear acts, their use of masks, and a host of other related games and diversions. To curb and ultimately eradicate these vestiges of paganism, Aleksei proposed two drastic measures: all musical instruments connected with such entertainments were ordered confiscated and burned, and all persons engaged in *skomorokh* activities became subject to severe penalties. First and second offenders were to be whipped. Those caught for the third or fourth time were to be exiled to the border regions. Since there was no Novgorod to emigrate to, as in the eleventh century, the *skomorokhi* formally ceased to exist as a professional class in Russia after 1648. Many of them undoubtedly were forced into exile. Those who remained abandoned their former trade and settled down to a less precarious existence. The *coup de grâce* came in 1657 when the Orthodox

38. Zabelin, *Istoriia*, 2:441–44.

39. I. Beliaev, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, said that it was still possible to hear stories from many an elder about how the *skomorokhi* would come into a village or town in several bands. One group would entertain and keep the people occupied while another would loot their homes. See his "O *skomorokhakh*," *Vremennik Imperatorskago obshchestva istorii i drevnostei rossiiskikh*, 2 (1859): 83.

40. A full text of this *gramota* can be found in P. I. Ivanov's *Opisanie gosudarstvennago arkhiva starykh del* (Moscow, 1850), pp. 296–99.

Church added its own voice to the official ban by declaring the skomorokhi excommunicated.⁴¹

After 1648 references to the skomorokhi in Russian sources become rare or nonexistent. There is reason to believe, however, that at least some of the minstrels did survive the purges of Aleksei and even continued to practice the art of singing *byliny* on a limited scale and mostly for private audiences.⁴² At least this would seem to be the implication of a statement made by Tatishchev in his *Istoriia rossiiiskaia*: "Formerly, I used to listen to skomorokhi sing ancient songs about Prince Vladimir, in which his wives were enumerated; also songs about famous heroes such as Ilia Muromets, Alesha Popovich, Solovei Razboinik, Diuk Stefanovich, and others."⁴³ It has even been suggested that the singing of such songs by skomorokhi was continued well into the eighteenth century and that Kirsha Danilov may have recorded the songs for his *Sbornik* from them.⁴⁴

In the introduction to his *Skomorokhi na Rusi* A. S. Famintsyn calls the Russian minstrel-entertainers the earliest representatives of Russian popular epos, theater, and music.⁴⁵ To some extent the relation of the skomorokhi to each of these three aspects of Kievan and Muscovite secular culture has been touched upon, if only briefly, in the preceding pages. Much has been left unsaid, however, especially with regard to folklore and the role of the skomorokhi in its dissemination and preservation. Music and musical instruments, too, have been treated only peripherally in the first part of this essay, and the theater has been discussed only in its earliest primitive stages. A closer look at all three—folklore, music, and theater—is necessary to establish more precisely the total impact of the skomorokhi on the cultural heritage of Russia.

Tatishchev's remarks about hearing skomorokhi sing heroic tales, or *byliny*, in the early eighteenth century, together with what we know about the

41. *Akty*, vol. 4: 1645–1700, pp. 138–39. Some churchmen did not need an official ecclesiastical ban of the skomorokhi, but rather dealt with the *veselye liudi* on their own terms. The Archpriest Avvakum described his chance encounter in 1648 with some skomorokhi, whom he put to flight after destroying their musical instruments and setting their trained bears free. See N. K. Gudzy, ed., *Zhitie protopopa Avvakuma* (Moscow, 1934), p. 75.

42. At least one scholar maintains that he knew of a peasant from the province of Nizhny-Novgorod who earned a living as a practicing skomorokh as late as the mid-nineteenth century. He describes him as an itinerant bagpipe player who could also do a variety of bird calls. See V. I. Dal, *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivago velikoruskago iazyka*, vol. 4, 3rd ed. rev. (St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1909), p. 202.

43. V. N. Tatishchev, *Istoriia rossiiiskaia*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1768), pp. 44–45, n. 16.

44. Chadwick, *Russian Oral Literature*, p. 264.

45. Famintsyn, *Skomorokhi*, p. 2.

involvement of the skomorokhi in the singing and composing of historical songs in the reigns of Ivan IV and Michael Romanov, make it fairly certain that at least from the second half of the sixteenth century the Russian minstrel-entertainers regarded folklore as part of their professional repertoire. Less obvious is their relation to the *byliny* of the Kievan and Novgorod cycles in an earlier age. Nowhere in historical sources, for example, are the pre-Muscovite skomorokhi associated with the recitation of narrative folk poetry. What has given rise to the widespread belief that the skomorokhi were in some way connected with the *byliny* in their formative stage is the internal evidence found in some of the heroic tales themselves. Most representative in this regard is the *bylina* "Dobrynia v ot'ezde."⁴⁶

The hero, Dobrynia Nikitich, has been away from his home and his wife for twelve years. Alesha Popovich, his sworn brother, brings the wife false tidings of her husband's death and then proceeds to woo and marry her. While the three-day marriage feast is in progress Dobrynia returns to Kiev after having been told by his faithful steed and then by his mother what has happened. Enraged, he resolves to go to the marriage banquet unannounced and incognito:

They brought him his skomorokh attire,
They brought him his *gusli* of maple-wood,
The youth dressed himself as a skomorokh,
And went to the splendid, honorable feast.⁴⁷

Without stopping to ask leave of the gatekeepers Dobrynia makes his way into the banquet hall:

"Tell me, which is the skomorokh's place for me?"
Vladimir of royal Kiev replied in anger:
"That is the skomorokh's place for you,
On that glazed oven over there,
On the glazed oven behind the stove."
Hastily he jumped onto the place indicated,
Onto the glazed oven;
He tightened his silken strings,
His golden chords,
And began to wander over the strings;
He began to sing snatches of song,
He played a tune from Tsargrad,
And in his song he recounted all that had
taken place in Kiev,
Both of old and young.⁴⁸

46. A. E. Gruzinsky, ed., *Pesni sobranuyia P. N. Rybnikovym*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1909), no. 26, pp. 162-72.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 167, ll. 191-94.

48. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-69, ll. 225-38.

Dobrynia's playing pleases Vladimir, and the prince rewards the skomorokh by asking him to come down from the "glazed oven" and sit at the main table with him and the guests of honor, the newlyweds. Dobrynia finally makes his true identity known and reclaims his wife from Alesha, whom he beats severely for his perfidy.

V. F. Miller and other scholars regard this *bylina* and Dobrynia's role in it as indicative of the participation of the skomorokhi in Kievan court life and entertainment.⁴⁹ Miller even goes a step further and suggests that the skomorokhi not only sang *byliny* on occasions such as the one described above but also took an active part in composing these heroic narratives.⁵⁰ One could perhaps agree with Miller that Dobrynia's song, in which "he recounted all that had taken place in Kiev, both of old and young," was indeed a *bylina*. However, there is evidence that seems to militate strongly against the premise that the skomorokhi were the equivalent of court minstrels or bards in Kievan Rus'.

From what we know of the early skomorokhi through historical sources they were a distinctly lower-class phenomenon, emerging from among the peasants and confining their entertainment mainly to that class. It would thus have been extremely difficult for them to gain access to the inner precincts of the princely court as Dobrynia seems to have done. Furthermore, in the two other *byliny* in which the skomorokhi play an active primary role,⁵¹ and one in which they are mentioned in passing,⁵² they do evince an insouciant earthiness that is both wholly consistent with their traditional character and totally incompatible with the more serious temperament of a court bard. It is conceivable that in the original version of this *bylina* Dobrynia may have employed the disguise of a court minstrel to gain entry into Vladimir's banquet hall. His disguise probably resembled the costume worn by the figure depicted on a twelfth-century Kievan bracelet which Rybakov has described as a *gusli*-player.⁵³ Dobrynia therefore assumed the role of

49. V. F. Miller, *Ocherki russkoi narodnoi slovesnosti*, vol. 1: *Byliny* (Moscow, 1897), p. 59; Famintsyn, *Skomorokhi*, p. 4; Findeizen, *Ocherki*, 1:110.

50. Miller, *Ocherki*, 1:59.

51. "Terentii muzh Danil'evich," in *Pesni sobrannia Rybnikovym*, vol. 2, no. 156, pp. 382-85, and "Vavilo i skomorokhi," in N. P. Andreev, ed., *Byliny: Russkii geroicheskii epos* (Leningrad, 1938), no. 33, pp. 436-41.

52. In one version of the *bylina* about Vasilii Buslaev reference is made to the hero's joining up with a band of *veselye molodtsy* (i.e., skomorokhi). See A. P. Evgen'eva and B. N. Putilov, eds., *Drevnie rossiiskie stikhotvoreniia sobrannye Kirsheiu Danilovym* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1958), pp. 59-67.

53. The bracelet figure is wearing a pointed cap and a loose-fitting ankle-length shirt (attire which differs radically from that worn by the much more flamboyant skomorokhi as depicted in the fourteenth-century Novgorod miniatures). He is playing a five-sided *gusli* with both hands while holding what appears to be a crude version of a bagpipe in his mouth. See B. A. Rybakov, *Remeslo drevnei Rusi* (Moscow, 1948), p. 269, *illus.* 61.

a *gusliar* and not of a *skomorokh*, the latter name probably being an accretion which was introduced into the *bylina* at a later date when the *skomorokhi* had become a symbol synonymous with entertainment in the popular mind.

Since it was not the *skomorokhi* but rather the *gusliari*, or *gusli*-players, who served as court minstrels and were the representatives of the Kievan heroic tradition, it is to them that one must look for the origin of the *byliny* as well as for a possible answer to the question of their eventual dissemination. That there was a tradition of heroic poetry in Kievan Rus' is evident, first of all, from the references by name to several illustrious bards in historical and literary sources.⁵⁴ In the *Slovo o polku Igoreve*, for example, the poet-singer Boian is referred to on three separate occasions.⁵⁵ Such was his fame that he is credited with having once sung the praises of Iaroslav the Wise (d. 1054), Mstislav of Tmutorokan (d. 1036), and Roman Sviatoslavich (d. 1079).⁵⁶ But except for a few lines attributed to him and quoted in the *Slovo* nothing of Boian's poetic genius has survived.

Another famous bard, Mitus, is mentioned in the *Ipatievskaiia letopis'*. After he was taken prisoner by Daniil of Galich in 1241 he refused to sing for the Galician prince, because his pride would not let him serve a new master.⁵⁷ This same prince also had songs of praise sung in his honor upon his return from a triumphant campaign in 1251.⁵⁸ A similar tribute was accorded Alexander Nevsky in Pskov after his victory over the German Knights in 1242.⁵⁹ Finally, there is one other interesting reference to a court bard who in 1201 was sent on a diplomatic mission as personal emissary of one of the princes of the House of Monomakh.⁶⁰

In addition to the named and unnamed court minstrels mentioned in historical sources there were probably others whose fame has not survived but whose anonymous art has been preserved to this day, if only in much altered form, in the *byliny*. It was these *gusli*-playing bards, or *gusliari*, who originally not only sang but also composed the Kievan heroic tales. As the heroic age waned, however, and with it the interest and patronage of the Kievan princes, the *gusliari* found it economically necessary to join the ranks of the *skomorokhi*, becoming very soon thoroughly amalgamated with them.

54. B. D. Grekov traces the Kievan heroic tradition as far back as the Antes. Unfortunately he does not cite his source for such a conclusion. See *The Culture of Kiev Rus* (Moscow, 1947), p. 79.

55. S. Suvorin, ed., *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (photocopy of 1800 ed.) (St. Petersburg, 1904), pp. 2-4, 37, 44.

56. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

57. *PSRL*, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg, 1843), p. 180.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

59. *Letopis' po voskresenskomu spisku*, in *PSRL*, vol. 7 (St. Petersburg, 1856), p. 151.

60. *Ipatievskaiia letopis'*, p. 155.

As ecclesiastical censure of their secular art increased and political instability took hold in the Kievan lands, they made their way north with the *veselye liudi*. The skomorokhi, for their part, proceeded to enrich their own rather pedestrian repertoire with a wealth of new oral literature which they transformed, by reworking and embellishing, into popular folk tales.⁶¹

One of the classic examples of this editing of the *byliny* by the skomorokhi occurs in a version of a song about Dobrynia's long absence from home and his wife's remarriage to Alesha Popovich.⁶² Though in most instances Prince Vladimir is treated with utmost respect and affection, in this particular *bylina* his reputation is somewhat tarnished and he emerges looking like a foolish old man when he is told to stuff his mouth with a shoe-rag for his part in arranging the marriage between Dobrynia's wife and Alesha.⁶³ Clearly, when originally performed at court this *bylina* would not have contained such an uncomplimentary portrait of the *solnyshko* of Kiev, Saint Vladimir the Great. But the audience had changed, and so the *byliny* had to be tailored to fit the mood of the new listeners. Much more of the fantastic and humorous was now introduced into these folk tales, and they began to lose much of their historicity. Even the tunes to which the *byliny* were formerly sung, once tranquil and stately, now acquired a swifter and gayer air. At the same time they were slowly disseminated by the skomorokhi to an ever-widening circle of Russian peasants, especially in the northern backwoods areas around Lake Onega, Lake Ladoga, and the White Sea region.

When Novgorod gave way to Moscow as the center of skomorokh activity in the sixteenth century, the Russian minstrel-entertainers brought the *byliny* with them to their new home. Here they not only continued to recite these ancient tales but also used them as models in composing their own neoheroic historical songs. Stock heroic formulae were borrowed freely from the *byliny* and were now used to relate the deeds of such "modern" heroes as Ivan IV and Peter the Great.⁶⁴ Although inferior in quality to the *byliny*, the historical songs did serve to revive a heroic tradition in Muscovite Russia. When Aleksei came to power the activities of the skomorokhi were sharply curtailed, though not totally halted, especially where the recitation of folk

61. At least two nonheroic *byliny* have been attributed to the skomorokhi: "Terentii muzh Danil'evich" (often simply "Gost Terentii") and "Vavilo i skomorokhi." Both of these *byliny* are said to contain characteristically "skomorokh" lines, especially at the beginning. See also Chadwick, *Russian Oral Literature*, p. 264.

62. This particular variant of the *bylina*, commonly known in Rybnikov's collection as "Dobrynia v ot'ezde," appears as "Dobrynia i Alesha" in A. F. Gil'ferding [Hilferding], *Onezhskii byliny zapisannyya Aleksandrom Fedorovichem Gil'ferdingom letom 1871 goda*, vol. 3, 2nd ed. (St. Petersburg, 1900), no. 215, pp. 104-13.

63. *Ibid.*, II. 285-86.

64. For an analysis of the formulae used in *byliny* composition see P. M. Arant's "Formulaic Style and the Russian Bylina," *Indiana Slavic Studies*, 4 (1967): 7-51.

songs was concerned. Official persecution did force many of them to disperse and even to go into exile, but this only provided a further opportunity for the dissemination of the *byliny* and historical songs in all directions from Moscow and even as far as Siberia.

The role of the *skomorokhi* in the preservation and dissemination of folklore was closely linked with their important contribution to the development of secular music, first in Kievan Rus' and later in Muscovite Russia. Before the introduction of Christianity in the late tenth century, Kievan music was characterized primarily by ritualistic songs of worship, ceremonial (i.e., wedding, funeral) songs, and seasonal songs such as *koliadky* and *haivky*. With Byzantine Christianity came Byzantine chant and a vigorous attempt to suppress native music because of its close identification with paganism. This attempted suppression was only partially successful, because it was mainly aimed at the more populous urban centers and left the remote rural areas with their flourishing folk music relatively untouched.

Although the *gusliari* must be given some credit for initially conserving the *byliny* melodies, it was the *skomorokhi*—so intimately involved in all the traditional folk festivals—who did the most to preserve and perpetuate native music among the Eastern Slavs. In the pre-Mongol and Mongol periods they carried this music with them to the north and eventually to Moscow. There it was transplanted and began a new life—not infrequently threatened by Western influence—and ultimately provided the spiritual content for the great Russian musical compositions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The *skomorokhi* also made a substantial contribution to the evolution of instrumental music in Russia. Their versatility with various stringed, wind, and percussion instruments enabled them to develop and improve many of these instruments and evolve new techniques and methods of playing them. The *gusli* in particular must be singled out as an instrument widely popularized by the *skomorokhi*.

Though the relation of the *skomorokhi* to folklore and music is fairly obvious, their place in the history of the Russian theater is more difficult to pinpoint. The problem is chiefly one of definition, for until the late seventeenth century there was no formal theater in Russia to speak of, and the *skomorokhi* had already ceased to function as professional entertainers by the mid-seventeenth century. One must, therefore, look to the less structured traditional folk drama embodied in the festivals and rituals of the people for the antecedents of the modern Russian theater.

As was indicated in the first part of this essay, both pre-Christian and Christian Slavs were thoroughly accustomed to celebrating a succession of cyclic festivals and rites as well as the important milestones in their personal

lives, particularly marriage. In time these ritual celebrations came to be dominated first by individual clan leaders and eventually by the skomorokhi.

The exact nature of skomorokh involvement in folk drama is difficult to ascertain. We do know that in addition to singing and dancing, the wearing of masks constituted an integral part of many of the festival celebrations. In fact, the identification of masks and masquerading with ritual seasonal games became so close that the two were frequently thought of as one. Luka Zhidiata, an eleventh-century bishop of Novgorod, warned his flock to shun *moskoliudstvo*, or games that were characterized by the wearing of masks.⁶⁵ There is also no doubt that the skomorokhi, perhaps in imitation of the Byzantine mimes, had very early incorporated masks into their own performances. Prince Kurbsky, for example, accused Ivan IV of masquerading during his drinking bouts “in imitation of the skomorokhi.” Aleksei specifically condemned the “masks and costumes” of the *veselye liudi* in his *gramota* of 1648.⁶⁶ The step from mask to theater is small indeed, and though the skomorokhi themselves would never take it, they must at least be credited with preparing the ground.

Admittedly this brief general description of the impact of the skomorokhi on Russian folklore, music, and theater leaves many tantalizing questions unanswered or only half-answered. Some, such as the nature and structure of skomorokh “dramatic” performances, may never be resolved owing to a lack of relevant information. Others should and will become the subject of a much longer study on the skomorokhi which seems long overdue. What has been said here, however, should prove sufficient to demonstrate that the Russian minstrel-entertainers did play a more than casual role in the socio-cultural history of Kievan Rus' and Muscovite Russia.

65. Luka Zhidiata, “Pouchenie Arkhiiepiskopa Luki k bratii,” *Russkiiia dostopamiatnosti*, 1 (1815): 9.

66. Kurbsky, *Skazaniia*, 1:120; Ivanov, *Opisanie*, p. 297.