

## Russian Demonology Relevant to Bulgakov and Other Russian Writers

NB Christians in Russia belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, a major branch of Christianity, which is not divided into Catholics and Protestants and does not accept the Pope as its spiritual leader. The Russians converted to Orthodoxy at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The history and culture of Russian Orthodoxy differs significantly from the history and culture of Christianity in the West. Russia had no Reformation or Counter-Reformation and no native Faust tradition. That tradition was familiar to educated people, writers, and artists from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on. This segment of Russian society had easy access to European culture simply by virtue of the fact that all educated Russians knew French and German and were immersed in the music, art and literature of Western Europe. At the same time, Russia enjoyed its own indigenous demonological tradition.

1. “Nechistaia sila” (unclean force/power) is probably the most common of the many “names” for the devil in Russian. The adjective “nechistaia” is a calque with the Greek word ἀκολάστης which means “unclean,” “sinful”. The ancient Greek noun κόλασις, in the literal sense of “chistka” (cleansing) was used already by Plato, and is frequent in the New Testament in its metaphoric meaning of “punishment”.

2. The Russian word most frequently used to designate “devil” is чѣрт (chort), a word most likely connected with the Russian word for “line” or “limit” (cherta) and related to the magic line, “chur,” usually a circle that the unclean force cannot cross. Another frequently used Common Slavic word for “devil” is бес (bes). In common parlance, from as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century “bes” was referred to as “lukavyi”, “the sly one”. In the Russian translation of “Our Father”, the line “Deliver us from evil” is: Избави нас от лукавого (Izbavi nas ot lukavogo), “Deliver us from the sly one.” Sometimes, “chort” in the singular is juxtaposed to “besy” in the plural to convey the idea of grand as opposed to petty evil, or Satan and the devils under his authority.

3. The devil of Russian popular belief in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries took shape under the influence of Christian notions and iconography. “Of particular importance in the creation of this highly stable image was the representation on the west wall of Orthodox churches of the Last Judgment, with its graphic portrayal of the torments of sinners in hell. ... In Russia as in Western Europe the devil was pictured through a combination of human and animal features: a basically human, though excessively pointed head and upright posture on one hand, and horns, hooves, and a tail on the other. In the Russian tradition the devil is black, and he is usually lame, a trait that the people attributed to his fall from heaven. Of course, the devil had the power of shape-shifting. Among the many animal forms that he assumed, black cats and dogs were the favorites. ... Other animals whose forms the devil assumed included pigs, horses, snakes, wolves, hares, squirrels, mice, frogs, pikes, magpies, and flies. The Russian folk imagined the social order among demons to be much like his own. They lived in families and were fond of smoking, drinking, and playing cards. Devils supposedly lived in swamps, dark thickets, deep pools or lakes on the one hand, and in hell, imagined as an expanse beneath the earth, on the other. They moved between the upper and lower worlds through special holes in the earth, but did not profane the sanctity of the earth itself. ... In the opinion of the Russian folk, the devil was always nearby waiting for his chance to snare some careless person. Yet, in spite of this belief in the devil’s total hostility toward man, there was a reluctance on the part of people to be overly active in their attacks lest their aggressiveness prompt the devil to inflict still greater reprisals. This attitude is reflected in the proverb, “Pray to God, but don’t anger the devil.”” (Linda Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*).

4. In Russian 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, the devil is a frequent presence, associated particularly with the themes of the Romantic hero (Lermontov’s “Demon”), Woman and sexuality (Gogol’s works and Tolstoy’s “The Devil”), art and illusion (Gogol’s “Portrait” and “Nevsky Avenue”, Tsvetaeva’s “The Devil”), reason, ratiocination, atheism, socialism and Catholicism (Dostoevsky’s *Devils*, and “The Devil” in *Brothers Karamazov*), banality, vulgarity, tastelessness (Gogol’s stories, Sologub’s *The Petty Demon*, also Dostoevsky’s work), and nothingness (Gogol).