

Russian Folklore



The term folklore

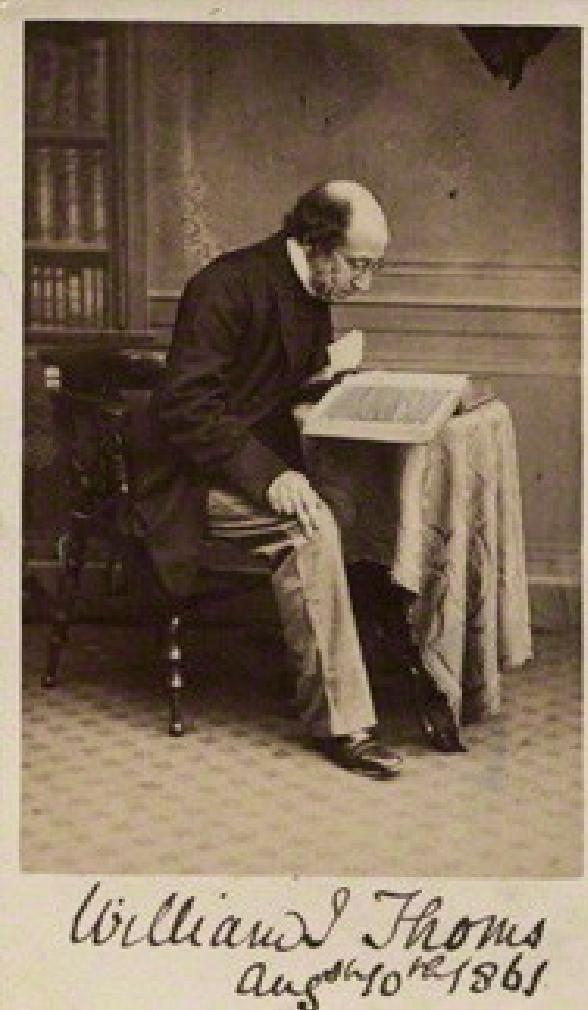
The term *folklore* (folk-lore or *the lore of the people*) was coined in by **William John Thoms** in 1846.

Other terms used before:

Popular antiquities

Popular literature

völkerkunde - literally
Volk ("people, nation")
+ *Kunde* ("science,
knowledge") used by the
Grimm brothers.



ring for immediate publication, in 2 vols. sm.

FOLK-LORE of ENGLAN

LLIAM J. THOMS, F. S. A., Secretary of the
Editor of "Early Prose Romances," "Lays and
Songs," &c. One object of the present work is
to contribute to the History of our National Folk-
lore some of the more striking Illustrations of the
Writings of Jacob Grimm and other German
scholars.

nications of inedited Legends, Notices of
and Popular Observances, Rhyming Charn-
solicited, and will be thankfully acknowled-
They may be addressed to the care of Mr. B.
S AND QUERIES," 186. Fleet Street.

You can learn more about William John Thoms (1803-1885) and read his first folklore columns [here](#):

<https://blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2014/08/the-two-first-folk-lore-columns/>

Folklore: definition

- Definition of the folklore is somewhat complicated as scholars to this day have no agreement on what exactly folklore is.

Main characteristics:

- It is passed through oral tradition (in most cases).
- Beliefs and practices which are held by "any group of people who share at least one common factor", - a family unit, a profession, or an ethnic, national, or religious community.
- No known author

Three phases of folklore

1. archaic/oral (before the writing)
2. Folkloric and written traditions co-exist
3. Post-folklore: contemporary urban folklore (“fakelore”)

Examples of the folkloric genres

- Magic tales
- Epics
- Folk songs
- Incantations
- Rituals
- Jokes
- Proverbs

Examples of Russian folkloric customs and beliefs:

BAD OMENS

- Never give knives, clocks or scarves as a present
- Don't whistle in the house
- Don't shake hands across a threshold
- Never give unmarried young women a corner seat (she will never get married)
- Never go back into the house immediately after leaving
- Don't buy anything for the baby before s/he is born.

GOOD OMENS

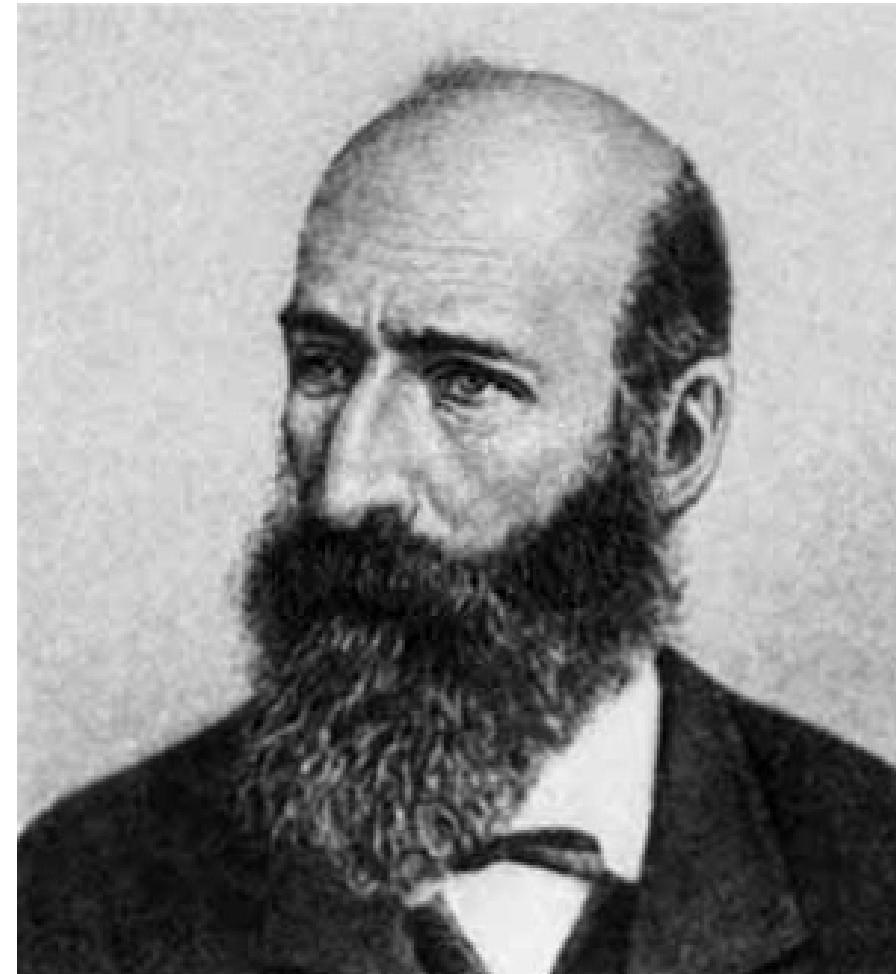
- If you see a spider – you'll get a letter
- If someone doesn't recognize you, you'll get rich

TAKING PRECAUTION

- Spit three times over your left shoulder
- Sit down before you go on a trip

Development of Folklore studies in Russia

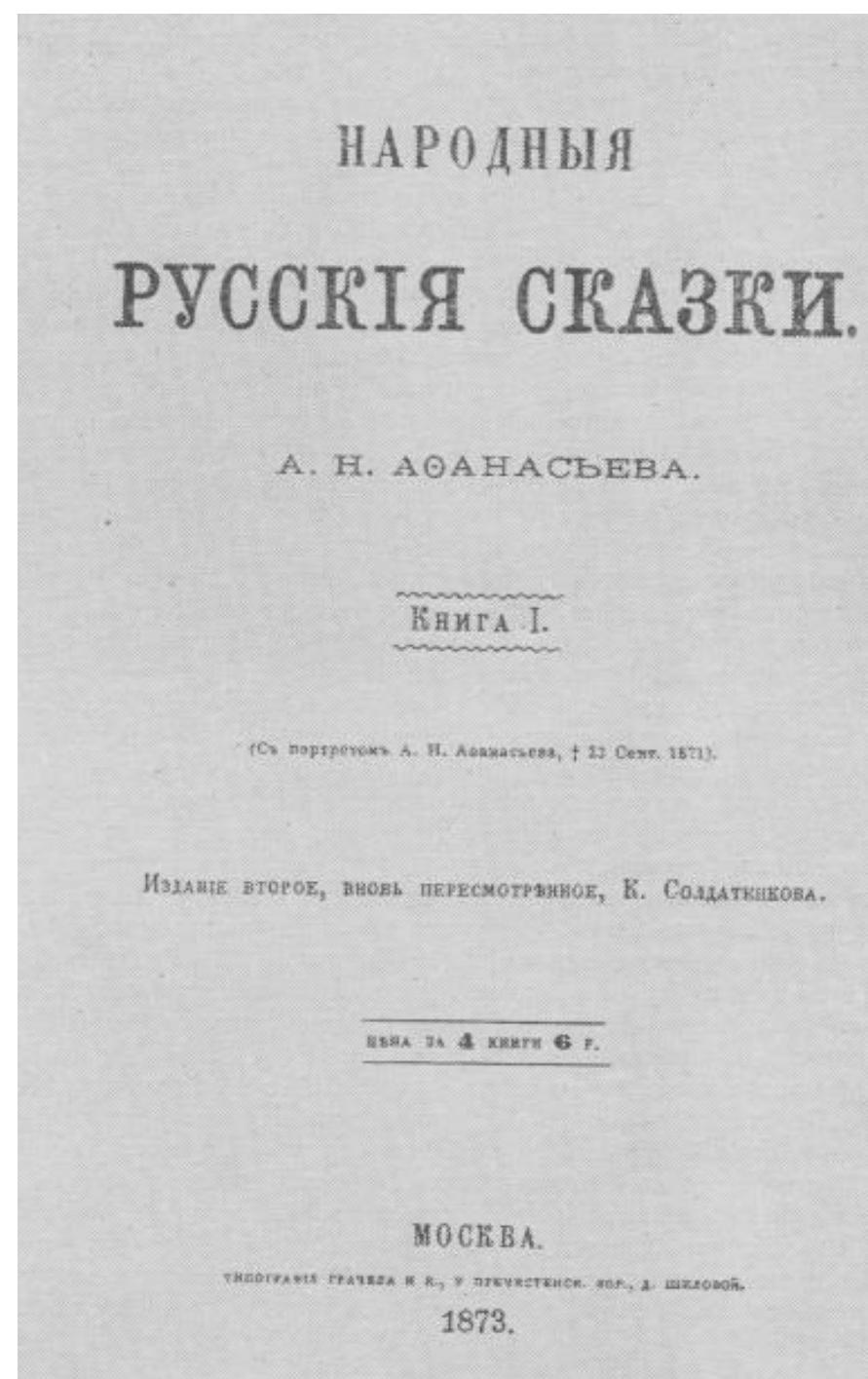
- Alexander Afanasyev (1826-71)
 - was a Russian counterpart to the brothers Grimm
 - Studied Slavic folk beliefs, myths, and fairy tales
 - ***Russian Folk Religious Legends*** (1860) was banned in Russia due to censorship. The Orthodox church found his collection blasphemous.



Afanasyev, continued

- Afanasyev published his famous collection of *Russian Fairy Tales* (1855-1863) which he separated in two parts:
 - *Russian Fairy Tales (for Children)* 2 vols.
 - *Russian Forbidden tales – published in Switzerland anonymously*

* His collection was really ahead of his time because he included all variants that he collected.



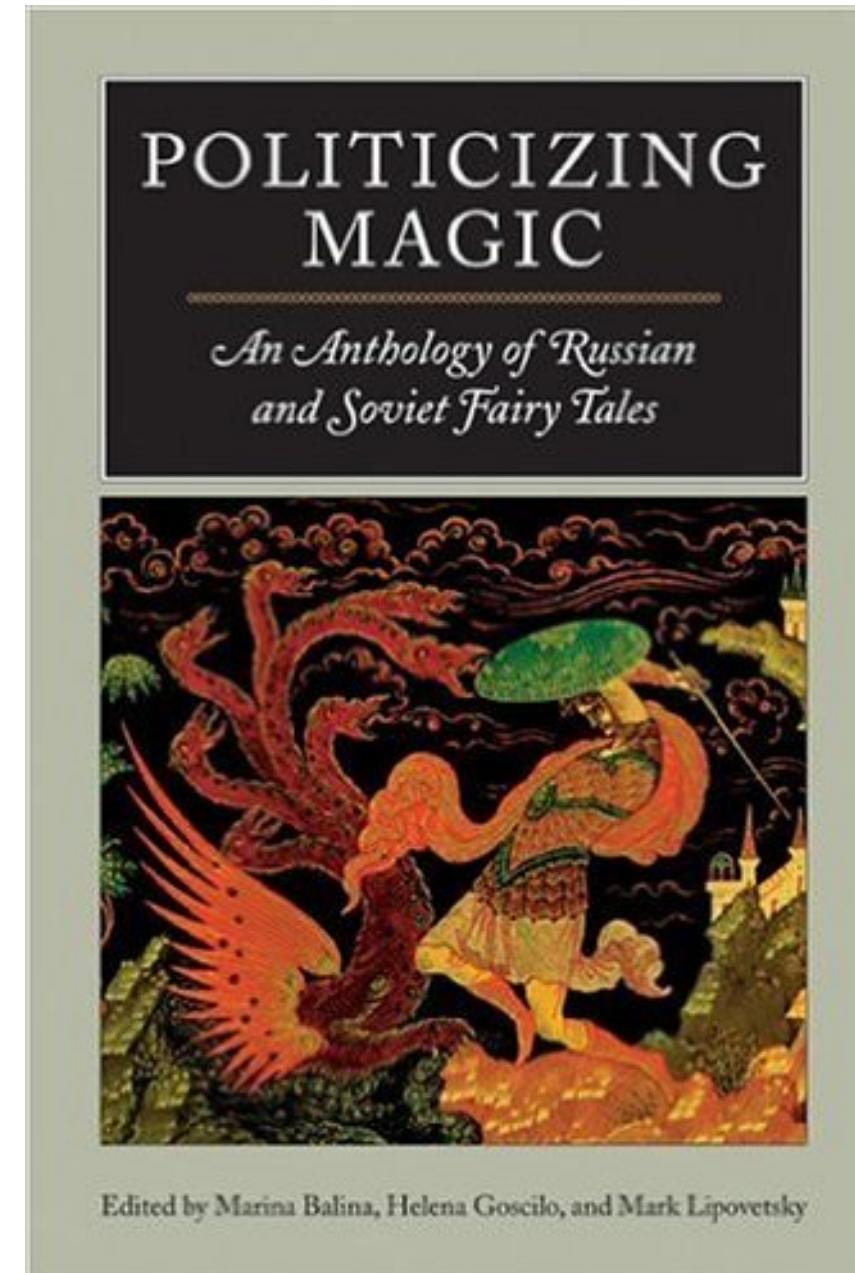
Afanasyev's legacy

- Made a highly valuable contribution to the dissemination and legitimization of Russian culture and folk belief.
- The influence of these folk tales can be seen in the works of many writers, artists and composers:

Writers: Pushkin

Artists: Repin, Vasnetsov, Bilibin, Vrubel, Roerich

Composers: Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Lyadov



Main types of Russian Folklore genres

- Byliny or epics
- Fairy tales (magic folk tales)

Epics

- **Bylina** (from ‘to be’; the original term: *starína*; from ‘old’) is a traditional East Slavic oral epic narrative poem. It is meant to be sung or recited by heart by special storytellers called in Russian *skaziteli* (from ‘to say’) singers of tales.
- As a genre, it arose during the Kievan period (10-13 c.)
- These epics were collected in Russia since the 17th c and published in either *lubok* or popular graphic art form or prose renditions for entertainment.
- Structural elements: introduction, narrative part, epilogue.
- Common themes: hero taking leave, saddling a horse, going on a journey, participating in a battle or battling a monster, getting married.
- Christian beliefs are mixed with pre-Christian ideas of magic and paganism: for instance, saints would appear to defend mortals against the forces of darkness.

Ilya of Murom and Nightingale the Robber (read at home)

- Ilya of Murom is one of the most famous epic warriors of Russia. (He is in 15 out of 53 epic narratives)
- Terms: ***bogatyr*** or ***vityaz*** – the warrior
- He was sanctified and is an Orthodox Saint.

Biography of Ilya of Murom

- He is described as a couch potato, i.e. he laid on the wood stove till he turned 33.
- He was handicapped and could not move, but was healed by mysterious people called *kaliki perekhozhie* – the wondering religious elders, probably Christ and his two apostles.
- After he was healed, he enlisted himself to the military service of Prince Vladimir of Kiev.
- In some versions of this epic cycle, Ilya of Murom fights with his antagonist, Nightingale the Robber. (read this epic at home)

Traditional Russian wood stove



knilekotija.ucoz.ru

What do we know about Nightingale the Robber?

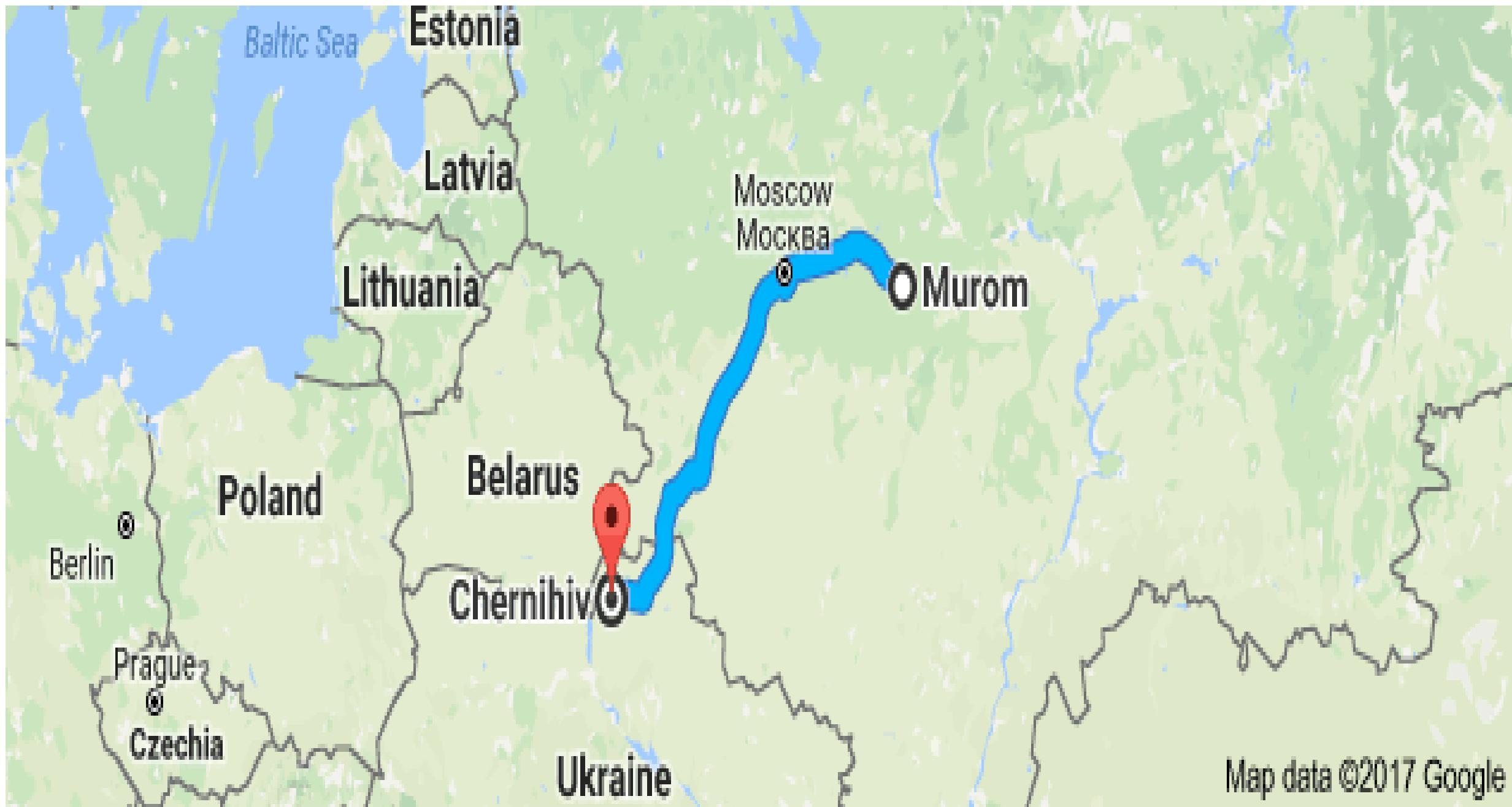
- Anthropomorphic creature who fights with a terrible whistling noise
- Usually depicted as either human or birdlike creature.
- Is represented as having oriental features
- Some researchers connect his image to the ancient Iranian deity of Simurgh (Ivanov, Toporov)



Ilya of Murom and Nightingale the Robber by Ivan Bilibin

Geography of the *Ilya of Murom & Nightingale* Bylina

- Murom – a city in Central Russia
- Karacharovo – a village near Murom
- Chernigov – a city in Northern Ukraine
- The distance between Murom and Chernigov – about 1,000 km



RUSSIAN EPICS IN ART

- Book illustrations
- Painting
- Music
- Costume design

Ilya of Murom and Nightingale the Robber in the 18th c Lubok art

Genre: Lubok is a Russian **popular print** characterized by simple graphics and narratives derived from literature, religious stories and popular tales.

Technology: These prints started as the woodcuts in the 17th and 18th centuries, then transitioned to the etchings and lithographs in the 19th.

Lubok literature: sometimes these prints appeared in series and are considered a predecessor to the comic strip genre.



Viktor Vasnetsov

1848-1926

Artist who specialized in
Russian historical and
mythological subjects

A key figure of Russian
revivalist movement



Viktor Vasnetsov, The Three Supermen/Bogatyrs (1881-1898)

This is the most famous painting by Viktor Vasnetsov.



It depicts the three Russian nights: Dobrynia Nikitich, Alesha Popovich and Ilya of Murom.

Ilya of Murom is in the center.

Viktor Vasnetsov. Vityaz at the Crossroads (1878)

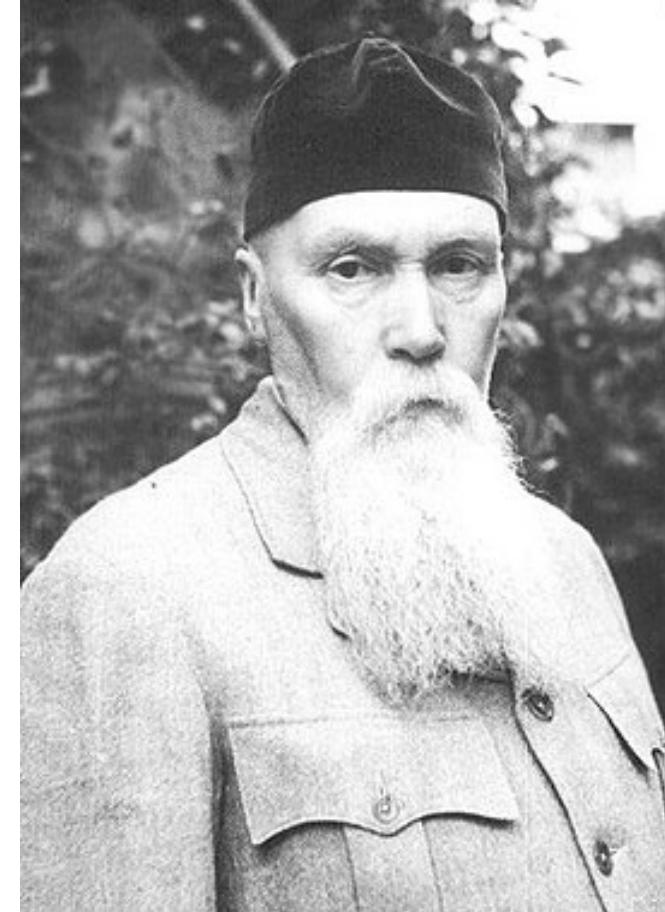


Nikolai Roerich

1848-1926

Painter who specialized in
Russian folklore subjects and
Indian landscapes

More than an artist:
a theosophist, archeologist,
traveler, and public figure



Nikolai Roerich, *Ilya of Murom* (1910)



Nikolai Roerich, *Nightingale the Robber* (1910)



Pay attention
to the house in
this painting!

Roerich's painting: two parts together



History of Budyonnovka, the Red Army hat

Bogatyr's Headpiece



The Red Army Hat



Russian artist Viktor Vasnetsov took place In 1918 contest for The Red Army uniform Design.

The actual uniform was a combination of sketches by several artists.

When did epics stopped being performed?

- Epic tradition existed rather late, until the 1930s and 1950s.
- This tradition was disrupted by WWII
- After the war, new oral genre of *noviny* as opposed to *stariny* or *byliny* appeared. It featured heroic deeds of soldiers in the war and positive communist heroes.

REVIEW QUESTIONS:

- How old are Russian epics?
- When were they first recorded?
- When did they stop being performed?

Fairy tales (Magic tales)

- The definition of the fairytale is just as complicated as the definition of the folklore. It is a short story that involves magic and supernatural forces.
- Fairytales are very old, much older than the epics, and go back to Neolithic times.
- The first written fairytales were found in Ancient Egypt.
- Fairytales of different nations often have common narrative structures.
- Vladimir Propp is the most famous 20th century researcher of Russian magic tales.

Vladimir Propp (1895–1970)



- *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)

The plot of a wonder folktale consists of

- 31 functions (= actions, events)
performed by
- 7 actants (= types of characters)

Proppian functions (31) = a fairytale plot

1. A household member leaves home.
2. There is a prohibition to do something...
3. ...that the hero forgets/ignores.
8. As a result, there is a lack of something/someone.
11. This forces the hero to go on a quest in search of the missing item or person.
12. On the quest, (s)he encounters magical helpers.
14. The helper (donor) donates a magical agent/tool.
25. The hero is subjected to one or more tests.
26. Tests are solved.
31. (S)he achieves his/her reward (getting married to a princ[ess]e and ascending to the throne)

Proppian functions (31) = a fairytale plot

1. ABSENTATION
2. INTERDICTION
3. VIOLATION of INTERDICTION
8. VILLAINY or LACKING

11. DEPARTURE
12. ENCOUNTER with the DONOR
14. DONATION / RECEIPT of a MAGICAL AGENT

25. DIFFICULT TASK
26. SOLUTION
31. WEDDING or REWARD

Propp's actantial model (7 actants)

1. The HERO
2. The DISPATCHER
3. The VILLAIN
4. The DONOR
5. The HELPER (magical object or creature)
6. The PRINCESS or PRISE
7. The FALSE HERO

Many characters can play different roles (actantial models)

Vladimir Propp (1895–1970)

- *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928)
the invariant plot of the folktale (fairy tale) described as a sequence of 31 ‘functions’ (actions) performed by 7 ‘characters’ (actors)
- *The Historical Roots of the Fairy Tale* (1946)
the origins of the folktale (fairy tale):
myth and ritual (rites of passage)

Why is Propp important to know?

- Propp's work was translated into English in 1950s.
His ideas were soon picked up and elaborated by theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Joseph Campbell.
- Propp's name is frequently mentioned in literary studies, narrative analysis, anthropology and semiotics.
- Propp is also studied by the filmmakers and screenwriters who are learning to construct a narrative.

Russian Fairytale Characters

Positive

- Ivan the Fool *
- Fire Bird *
- Vasilisa the Beautiful*
- Vasilisa the Wise
- The Tsar

Negative

- Koshchei the Immortal *
- Baba Yaga *
- Kikimora (house spirit)
- Leshiy (forest spirit)
- Vodyanoi (water spirit)
- Gorynych the Dragon

Ivan the fool (Ivanushka)

- Peasant
- Youngest son in the family
- Can't handle the simplest tasks and keeps doing stupid things
- People don't take him seriously
- With miraculous assistance, however, Ivan achieves what others have failed to do.
- Typically: a HERO



Firebird

- Russian version of the legend of Phoenix
- Beautiful bird enveloped in fire
- It is easy to capture when this bird is eating apples in the Tsar's garden or wheat grains in the field.
- The feather of this bird has a magic power.
- Typically: a HELPER



Igor Stravinsky, *Firebird* (1910) one act ballet



- This ballet is famous for its original costumes and decorations.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?
v=fzCe7EozFJI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzCe7EozFJI)



Vasilisa the Beautiful

- Merchant's daughter
- Her mother died when she was young
- Her stepmother and stepsisters treat her badly
- She is good natured
- She has a magic doll that her mother left her
- The doll helps her to do the hard work and protects her



Ivan Bilibin, Illustrations for Vasilisa the Beautiful (1899-1900, 1902)



Koshchei the Immortal

- Evil monarch. Likes to kidnap women and keep them in captivity
- Not completely immune to death
- One can kill him by breaking a needle that is hidden inside of an egg.
- The egg is hidden inside of a duck, the duck is hidden inside of a wild rabbit, and the wild rabbit is hidden in a chest inside of an oak tree.
- Typically: a VILLAIN



Baba Yaga

- Witch
- Flies around in mortar and with a broom
- Lives in the forest in a house on fowl legs. The house has no windows or doors.
- She is known to eat little children.
- She is a controversial character.
Typically: a VILLAIN. But sometimes she is a DONOR (gives away helpful magical objects).
- Her most famous utterance: I smell Russian flesh/spirit!

Фу-фу-фу, русским духом пахнет!



Hut on fowl's legs



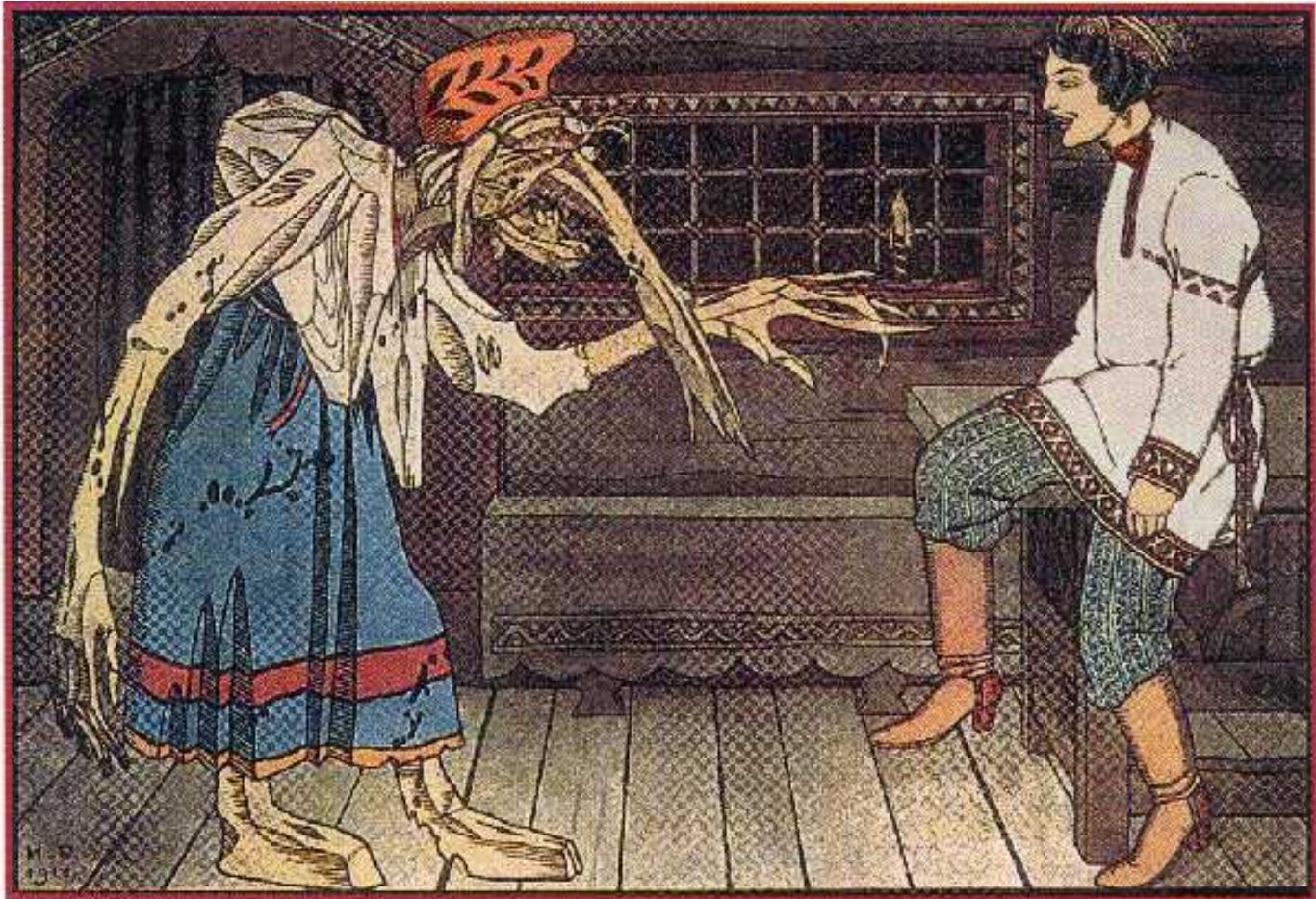
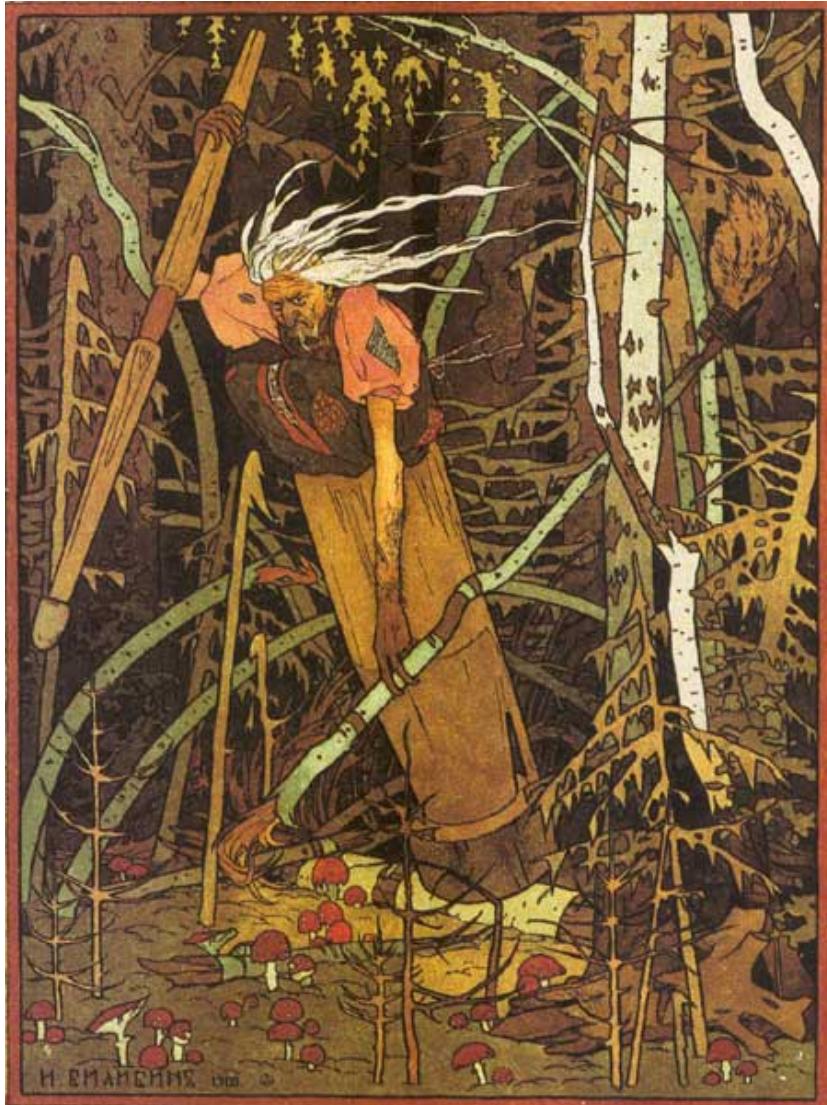
- Baba Yaga lives in a hut on fowl's legs.
- The hut itself is a living creature and can rotate upon the hero's request.
- The prototypes of this hut can be found in the traditional architecture of the Finno-Ugric people. Examples: Mansi and Saami houses.



Baba Yaga in music

- Modest Mussorgsky: No. 9 "The Hut on Fowl's Legs" from *Pictures from an Exhibition – A Remembrance of Viktor Hartmann*; a suite in ten movements (1874)
- Pyotr Tchaikovsky, The Witch /Baba Yaga in his "Children's Album" (1878)
- Anatoly Lyadov symphonic poem "Baba Yaga" (1891-1904)

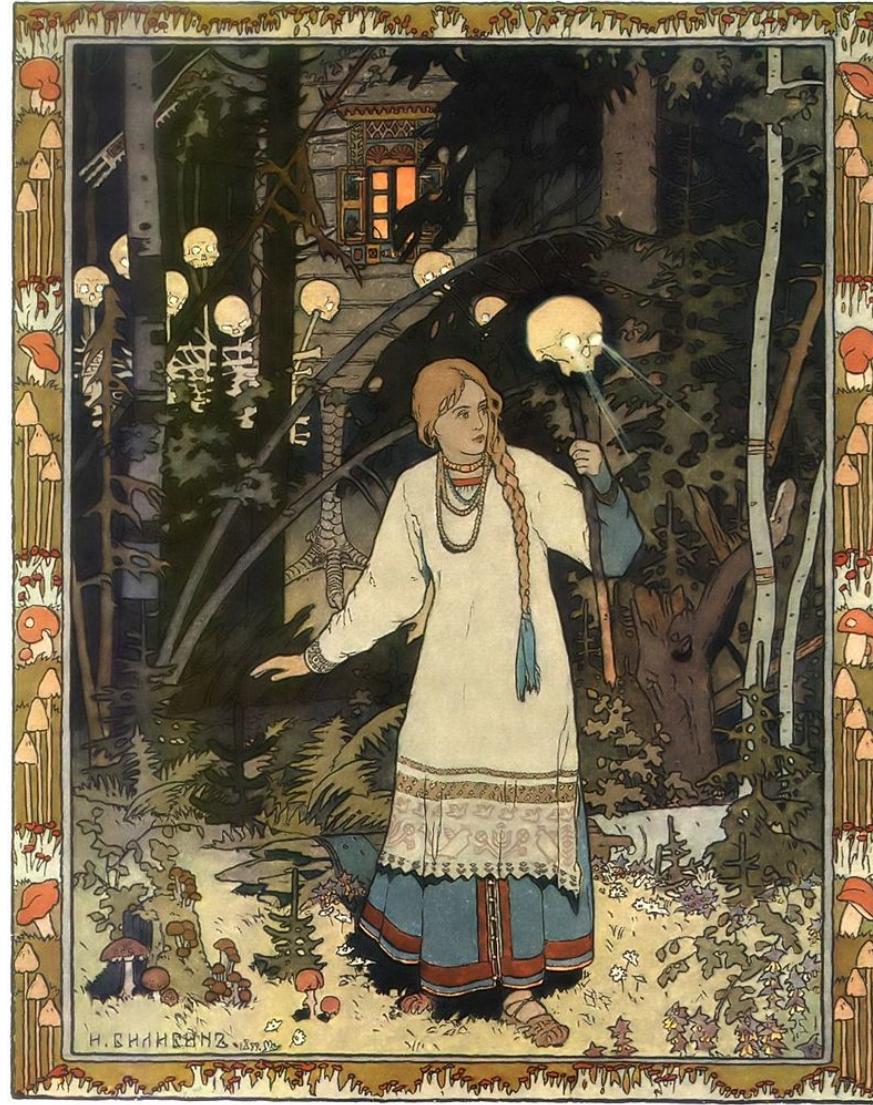
Ivan Bilibin, Baba Yaga (1899-1902)



Viktor Vasnetsov, Baba Yaga (1917)



Bilibin created a number of images of Baba Yaga's house



Nikolai Roerich, The Hut of Death (1905)



Nikolai Roerich, *Nightingale the Robber* (1910)

The best known Baba Yaga in film

- This cinematic fragment is known to all Russians.

Georgy Miliar in *Morozko*
(1964)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3seb1s1b-N4>



Review: Epics

- Folklore
- Epics and fairytales
- Epics
 - Appeared in 10-13th, and recorded as early as the 17th c
 - Performed by skaziteli, singers of tales
 - *Bogatyri* or *vityazi*– Russian knights – epic heroes (Ilya of Murom)
 - Epics in art: Vasnetsov, Bilibin, Roerich
 - Epic characters in film and animation
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Three_Bogatyrs)

Review: Fairytales

- Recorded in the 19th century by Alexander Afanasyev, who was inspired by the brothers Grimm
- In the 20th century, these fairytales were studied by Vladimir Propp, who came up with a set of fairytale functions – their narrative structure
- The main characters of the fairytales are: Ivan the Fool, Vasilisa the Beautiful, Firebird, Koshchei, Baba Yaga and the others...(see on CCLE)
- In fine arts: Vasnetsov, Bilibin, Roerich
- In music: Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Lyadov
- In popular culture: film, animation