

Making Sense of the Empire's Others: Mikhail Chulkov's *Dictionary of Russian Superstitions* and the European Enlightenment

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Abstract:

This article is an analysis of Mikhail Chulkov's *Dictionary of Russian Superstitions*, published in 1782. It places the dictionary in the historical and cultural context of Enlightenment Europe, from which the genre was drawn, and suggests that Chulkov's use of the genre was part of his own efforts to fashion himself as a civilized, Enlightened man. The article considers the various practices and beliefs described in the dictionary and lays out the various categories of people those which "superstitious" practices and beliefs were ascribed. By comparing the various categories of people described in the dictionary, the article argues that Chulkov's vision of the Others of the Russian Empire was characterized by a sympathy towards Orthodox Christians and a skepticism about the ability of non-Orthodox subjects of the empire to become civilized. It also considers how Chulkov's treatment of women and Old Believers reveals his own anxieties about the persistence of superstition into an ostensibly Enlightened era of history.

Keywords:

Mikhail Chulkov, Enlightenment, dictionaries, superstition, empire, peasants, women, Old Believers, rationality

In 1782, the Russian bureaucrat and litterateur Mikhail Chulkov (1743-1792) published his *Dictionary of Russian Superstitions*. It consists of alphabetically arranged articles regarding the apparently "superstitious" practices of the Russian Empire's less Enlightened subjects. Chulkov summed up the purpose of the project nicely in its introduction:

Delusion is the same everywhere, and this great foe of human reason formerly and even today holds many peoples partially under its yoke, not excluding learned people. The goal for the publication of this book is to announce aversion to those laughable superstitions by frequent examination, and to eradicate them altogether, as much as possible, because fortunately today the majority of inhabitants of the world have been liberated from it.¹

This document, which has received relatively little attention from modern scholars of the Russian Empire, offers important insights into the cultural and intellectual worldview of Chulkov. The notion of superstition in eighteenth-century Europe was inflected with debates over the nature of reason and its proper relationship to faith in matters of religious

¹ Mikhail Dmitrievich Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii* (St. Petersburg: Pechatano v vol'noi tipografii u shnora, 1782), pref. 2. There is separate pagination for the prefatory material and the substantive articles of the dictionary itself. Quotes from prefatory material are cited as pref.

belief. As a category, it denoted a belief that reflected stupidity, gullibility, charlatanry, or religious error on the part of the believer.² Chulkov's *Dictionary* thus represents an effort to catalog and order the irrational and gullible beliefs of the various peoples residing within the empire that produced him.

Mikhail Chulkov was born to a middling merchant family in European Russia. Widely regarded as a seminal figure in the history of Russian literature for his psychological fiction, he is particularly remembered for his novel *The Comely Cook, or the Adventures of a Dissolute Woman* (1770), notable for its innovative use of unreliable first-person narration. In addition to fiction, Chulkov showed a keen interest in folklore and ancient Slavic culture from the beginning of his career.³ In the 1780s he turned away from *belles lettres* and pursued a number of scholarly projects funded by a wealthy merchant family, the Golikovs. Brothers Mikhail and Ivan, prominent merchants who were deeply involved in the early colonization of Alaska, generously funded Chulkov's *History of Russian Commerce*, in addition to two encyclopedic projects: *The Dictionary of Established Festivals*, and, indeed, the *Dictionary of Russian Superstitions*.⁴

The vast and ongoing expansion of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century, in which Chulkov's patrons were direct participants, produced an impulse on the part of the Empire's elite imperial subjects to study so-called primitive forms of knowledge.⁵ Chulkov's *Dictionary* is revealing precisely because it reflects beliefs and associations about the empire's Others—those who were supposed to be unenlightened, unreasonable, and less civilized than the elite literati of Moscow and St. Petersburg. By positioning himself and his supposed reader as appropriately virtuous and rational, as opposed to the superstitious people who were his objects of study, Chulkov also produced a text that reflects his own self-fashioning as an Enlightened, civilized man.

At the same time, Chulkov's project reflects the general awareness among the educated elite of the Russian Empire that they were on the periphery of European Enlightenment culture and that their status as a fully Enlightened nation was seen as rather

² Michael D. Bailey, *Fearful Spirits, Reasoned Follies: The Boundaries of Superstition in Late Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013) and *Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 49-50; Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51-59.

³ In 1766 he published *The Mockingbird, or Russian Folktales*, a collection of stories that ostensibly emerged from Slavic tradition. The following year, his *Short Mythological Dictionary* appeared, a text that included articles on an array of ancient Greek and ancient Slavic pagan gods and goddesses. The *Short Mythological Dictionary* was republished in *This and That (I to i s'e)*, a weekly journal he founded in 1769 that featured *belles lettres* and philosophical writings, including extended tracts on superstition; its run ended before the year was over. Between 1770 and 1774 he published multiple volumes of *The Collection of Various Songs*, in which he compiled the lyrics to songs that he claimed were linked to the deep Russian past. See Viktor Shklovskii, *Chulkov i Levshin* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Pisatelei v Leningrade, 1933), 59-88; A. Zapadov, "Zhurnal M. D. Chulkova 'I to i s'o' i ego literaturnoe okruzhenie," *XVIII Vek* 2 (Moscow-Leningrad, 1940), 95-141.

⁴ Shklovskii discusses the Golikov family's colonial and literary pursuits in detail in *Chulkov i Levshin*, 44-58. For a detailed account of the exploration and colonization of Alaska see Ilya Vinkovetsky, *Russian America: An Overseas Colony of a Continental Empire, 1804-1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵ Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) 47-71.

dubious by many western European Enlighteners.⁶ His objects of study were beyond the boundaries of Enlightenment and the fact that these superstitious ideas and practices defied the norms of civilization was the source of their scientific value.⁷ His reported fascination with the Others is also consistent with a general literary preoccupation with the empire's subjugated peoples in the eighteenth century.⁸ The *Dictionary*, which consists of alphabetically arranged articles on individual superstitious beliefs and practices totaling 271 pages, represents an attempt on the part of an educated writer from European Russia to articulate the phenomena at the edges of imperial civilization within the framework of European Enlightened rationalism. It thus serves as a valuable example of the historical and intellectual links between Enlightenment thought and European colonialism.⁹

This article is divided into a few sections. First, I will discuss the existing literature on the European Enlightenment and the ways in which Chulkov's dictionary must be understood within that context. Next, I will survey Chulkov's treatment of superstition in five parts, based on five rough "categories of Others" that I have identified in the text. Each of these categories reflects an aspect of Chulkov's worldview and his sense of himself in relation to other, supposedly less Enlightened, subjects of the empire. My reading of the *Dictionary* reveals a subtle and slippery hierarchy of superstition and rationality among Chulkov's objects of study. As the evidence below demonstrates, Chulkov implicitly portrayed Orthodox Russian peasants as, although eminently superstitious, more civilizable than the non-Russian and non-Orthodox subjects of the empire. Chulkov's writing also reflects his own misogynistic worldview, in which his discussion of modern women implicitly compares their behavior with that of pre-civilized, "superstitious" peoples. Finally, I offer some general reflections on the historiographical significance of these findings. Most centrally, *The Dictionary* offers a direct example of the ways in which Chulkov's self-conception was rooted in an understanding of himself as a member of Enlightened civilization and the educated elites of the Russian Empire as a civilizing force for its supposedly unenlightened subjects.

Dictionary as Enlightenment Genre

⁶ See Richard Butterwick, Simon Davies & Gabriel Sánchez Espinosa, eds., *Peripheries of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 2008); Andreas Schönle & Andrei Zorin, *On the Periphery of Europe, 1762-1825: The Self-Invention of the Russian Elite* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018); Andreas Schönle, Andrei Zorin & Alexei Evstratov, eds., *The Europeanized Elite in Russia, 1762-1825: Public Role and Subjective Self* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016). On western European perceptions of the Russian empire see Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

⁷ Charles W. J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁸ Harsha Ram, *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 31-59.

⁹ See Damien Tricoire, ed., *Enlightened Colonialism: Civilization Narratives and Imperial Politics in the Age of Reason* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

The Enlightenment is a famously nebulous concept, one that scholars have taken great pains to define more precisely in recent decades. In response to a once prevailing vision of the Enlightenment as an epistemological watershed based on an impulse to systematize and rationalize various fields of knowledge, some scholars have emphasized the localized context of Enlightenment thought and have focused on the heterogeneous manifestations of the Enlightenment in various national contexts.¹⁰ While acknowledging the importance of differing national contexts in the study of the Enlightenment, more recent scholarship has asserted that there was a transnational Enlightenment with particular characteristics that can be observed across languages and cultures in eighteenth-century Europe, and beyond. As John Robertson succinctly put it, the Enlightenment is best understood as "a distinct intellectual movement of the eighteenth century, dedicated to the better understanding, and thence the practical advancement, of the human condition on this earth."¹¹ Further, several scholars stressed that the self-conscious adoption of language, values, and practical efforts explicitly linked to the intellectual movement described by Robertson was also a key component of Enlightenment as a cultural phenomenon.¹²

In addition to the problem of national difference, scholars have done much to unpack the difficult question of Enlightenment's relationship to religion. The language of "Enlightenment" as a metaphor for the practical advancement of historical progress has its origins in a Christian theological context.¹³ In many parts of Europe, religious institutions far overshadowed their secular counterparts in terms of their professed commitment to Enlightenment values.¹⁴ The Russian Empire was no exception in this regard, and the notion of Enlightenment ("*prosveshchenie*") carried ambiguously religious and secular meanings throughout the eighteenth century.¹⁵ Although educated elites in the Russian Empire undoubtedly did distinguish between ideas and cultural products that were from Muscovite tradition and those that were of western or central European origin, there were many explicit

¹⁰ The former attitude is reflected in Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951). Also see, Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols (New York: Knopf, 1966). The latter interpretation can be credited to J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹¹ John Robertson, *The Enlightenment: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also his *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680-1760* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Silvia Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment: Race, Gender, and the Limits of Progress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹² Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹³ Anton Matytsin, "Whose Light Is It Anyway? The Struggle for Light in the French Enlightenment," in *Let There Be Enlightenment: The Religious and Mystical Sources of Rationality*, eds. Anton Matytsin and Dan Edelstein (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 62-85.

¹⁴ David Sorokin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Simon Dixon, "'Prosveshchenie': Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Russia," in *Peripheries of the Enlightenment*, ed. Richard Butterwick et al., 229-249; Gary Hamburg, *Russia's Path toward Enlightenment: Faith, Politics, and Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

proponents of Enlightenment who embodied traditional institutions of the Russian Empire—for example, Platon, the Metropolitan of Moscow.¹⁶

While I have not located evidence of what dictionaries Chulkov had personally read before embarking on his project,¹⁷ the genre of dictionary certainly would have been understood by someone like Chulkov as representative of a more secular, western orientation. By the 1780s it clearly evoked Denis Diderot's *Encyclopedia* (subtitled *A Reasoned Dictionary of Sciences, Arts, and Crafts*) which, as Jean le Rond D'Alembert described, was meant "to contain the general principles that form the basis" of each relevant subject "and the most essential facts that make up the body and substance of each."¹⁸ The dictionary genre in the eighteenth century was distinguished, above all, by its alphabetical order. The alphabetical arrangement had the advantage, according to D'Alembert, of being "more convenient and easier for our readers who, when they wish to inform themselves on the meaning of a word, will find it more readily in an alphabetical dictionary than in any other."¹⁹ As a result of this, "dictionaries, by their very form, are suitable only to be consulted, and they do not lend themselves to any continuous reading."²⁰ Yet the presumed reader of the dictionary was surely not one without any leisure time, as the long and detailed essays of Diderot's *Encyclopedia* demonstrate. Following the style of Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697), Diderot's dictionary was full of dry, ironic wit, clearly meant to entertain the reader. In this way, the eighteenth-century dictionary reflected cultural meanings of both pragmatic utility and leisure.

The generic features of Chulkov's *Dictionary*, then, help to illuminate the ways in which his project was embedded in Enlightenment practices of reading and thus was structured by Enlightenment notions of general human progress. In Chulkov's view, as his *Dictionary* shows, a commitment to rationalist principles of epistemology and a belief in universal natural law was a key aspect of civilization and indispensable for the forward march of historical progress. Thus, in his article on "Eclipse," he mocked the "rude ignoramuses" who failed to understand natural phenomena as "the invariable action of nature and the ordered arrangements of her laws, as they were observed by the ancient writers."²¹ For Chulkov, irrationality was a component of superstitious beliefs and behaviors, while the *Dictionary* represented the opposite of superstition: ordered, rationalized, and accessible knowledge based on supposedly empirical observation. Clearly, Chulkov's

¹⁶ Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Religion and Enlightenment in Catherinian Russia: The Teachings of Metropolitan Platon*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Unfortunately, Chulkov did not state his sources of information for the dictionary. While I have not found proof, it is possible that he drew from the highly publicized accounts of the Academic Expeditions to Siberia. See S. A. Kozlov, "Sibir v kontekste akademicheskikh ekspeditsii ekaterinskogo vremeni" in *A Century Mad and Wise: Russia in the Age of the Enlightenment: Papers from the IX International Conference of the Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia*, eds. Emmanuel Waegemans, J. S. A. M. van Koninsbrugge, Marcus C. Levitt (Groningen: Netherlands Russia Centre, 2015), 221-233. Nevertheless, he represented the information in the *Dictionary* as empirically true.

¹⁸ Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard N. Shwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 4.

¹⁹ D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*, 113.

²⁰ D'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse*, 107.

²¹ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 162-163.

understanding of the category of superstition reflected Enlightenment notions of rationality and civilization as much as it reflected a commitment to Enlightenment in the Orthodox Christian sense. In a passage quoted above, he insisted that "delusion is the same everywhere" and that "the majority of inhabitants in the world have been liberated" from superstition.²² For Chulkov, his superstitious objects of study were the remainder of a historical process of rationalization and the last obstacles to the immanent victory of knowledge over ignorance.

Five Categories of Others

Chulkov's decision about what kinds of people and what kinds of practices should be included in a dictionary of superstition reflect his own worldview and his own internal sense of social hierarchy. I have identified five categories of Others that Chulkov discusses in *The Dictionary* below. Although there are a handful of outlying articles, nearly all of the "superstitious people" mentioned in the text fit easily into these categories. Most notably, this list excludes discussion of Muslims and Catholics in the Russian Empire. I have excluded them here because they received hardly any attention in the dictionary itself.²³

- 1) **Ancient Slavs.** This generally refers to inhabitants of Ancient Rus'. Chulkov's discussion of this category draws mainly on material drawn from the *Primary Chronicle* and other monastic texts. This category, clearly, refers to practices that occurred in the past and for the most part stayed there, although he does draw links between ignorant contemporaries and ancient Slavs.
- 2) **Orthodox Peasants.** Chulkov rarely explicitly referred to peasants, opting for the much more generic "superstitious people" or "simple people," without offering ethnic, linguistic, or confessional descriptors. Still, in many cases he offered clues that situate his descriptions within a rural and clearly Christian milieu. Chulkov framed contemporary superstition, including among peasants, as a historical vestige that had survived from a more ignorant and irrational era. In many cases, Chulkov linked contemporary peasants' superstition with that of ancient Slavs.
- 3) **Non-Russian, Non-Orthodox Peoples** within the claimed territory of the Russian Empire. Chulkov offers extensive discussion of so-called "pagans," much of which is in reference to Finnic, Turkic, and other peoples of the steppe, Siberia, and the Urals regions. As with contemporary superstitious Russians, Chulkov represented non-Russian pagan beliefs and practices as vestiges of the past that have survived to the present.
- 4) **Women.** At several junctures Chulkov implied that women were particularly prone to superstition. His concern about the irrational tendencies of women reflects his own gendered understanding of reason and historical progress. Crucially, as I argue,

²² Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, pref. 2.

²³ The primary mention of Catholicism is under the article for "Mosque" (*Mechet'*), in which Chulkov wrote that "the Imam for the Mohammedans is the same as the first parish priest among the Catholics, and the Mullah is like a doctor of theology." Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 195-197.

many women appear here as superstitious moderns, that is, Russian contemporaries of Chulkov who, despite access to the fruits of civilization, were supposed to be naturally inclined to superstition.

- 5) **Old Believers.** In several places Chulkov mentioned those who broke with the mainline Russian Orthodox Church in the mid-seventeenth century in the wake of the Nikonian reforms. To some extent, this category overlaps with categories two and four, but not entirely. While Chulkov represented this break from the Church and the retention of pre-Nikonian Russian Orthodox practices as superstitious, he was cautious when it came to drawing links between Ancient pre-Christian Slavs' superstition and that of the Old Believers. At times, he explained the proliferation of Old Belief as a result of the peasants' inherent innocence and gullibility. In other cases, however, he emphasized the malicious duplicity of those who manipulated the innocent and thus drove the Old Belief movement.

1. Ancient Slavs

Chulkov showed a consistent fascination with the pre-Christian Slavic past. He described “polytheism, that is idolatry and superstition” as a phenomenon observed among “the ancient Slavs” and “still many who have lived in Russia.”²⁴ The Gods of the ancient Slavic pantheon were his main point of entry into the Ancient Slavic world. Belbog, for example, was “a God of the Varangian Slavs” who “had a bloody appearance covered with a multitude of flies.” Nevertheless “they considered him a kind god. The flies designated him as a feeder of grasses; they paid tribute to him with revelry, games, and happy feasts.”²⁵ The article on “Perun,” the apparent patriarch of the Slavic pantheon, offers another example by way of a detailed account, drawn from chronicles, of the first Slavic converts to Christianity casting an idol of him into a river and watching the god swim away downstream.²⁶ Clearly, Chulkov's understanding of superstition was historicized. If history was gradually progressing for the general weal of humankind, Chulkov saw superstition as naturally belonging to the past.²⁷

Yet, Chulkov's fascination with the ancient Slavic pantheon also touched on the place of Hellenic paganism in the eighteenth-century Russian imagination. As historian Andrei Zorin argued, the persistent representational bonds between the Hellenic pantheon and the Russian imperial state—and the decades-long plan to conquer Istanbul and resurrect the Byzantine Empire—reflected a widespread desire among elites to link the culture of elite Russian society with the cultural heritage of western Europe.²⁸ Catherine II and her court could demonstrate their legitimate ties to the culture of Western Europe by asserting Russia's continuity with Hellenic antiquity. Chulkov's work reflects a general cultural

²⁴ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, pref. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 220-221.

²⁷ Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

²⁸ Andrei Zorin, *By Fables Alone: Literature and State Ideology in Late-Eighteenth—Early-Nineteenth-Century Russia*, trans. Marcus C. Levitt et al. (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 24-61. On Hellenic themes in court pageantry see Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy, vol. 1: From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

ambiguity about the relationship between the Russian Empire and the legacy of Classical Greece. For example, at times Chulkov seemed to suggest an analogy between ancient Slavic and ancient Greek paganisms. In an article on "Volots," Slavic mythological giants, Chulkov wrote that "these monsters were giants (*velikany*) and meant the same thing for the Slavs as what Giants (*Giganty*) meant for the Greeks, they brought them sacrifices."²⁹ His interest in comparing Slavic and Greek pantheons went back as far as 1767, when he authored his *Short Mythological Lexicon*, mentioned above, a dictionary composed of descriptions of Hellenic and Slavic pagan gods side by side, suggesting an analogy between the pre-Christian Slavic and western European epochs. It is easy to see that this fits in nicely with Zorin's interpretation of the place of ancient Greek cultural representation in eighteenth-century Russia.

On the other hand, as a good Christian man Chulkov was hardly endorsing pagan ideas or practices, neither Greek nor Slavic. His choice to include long and substantive passages regarding "polythesism, that is idolatry and superstition" in his *Dictionary of Russian Superstitions* is alone sufficient evidence to demonstrate that for Chulkov paganism should be contained in antiquity, where it belonged.

2. Orthodox Peasants or "Superstitious People"

Explicit mentions of peasants in the dictionary are rare and usually come up in passages regarding the vaguely defined "superstitious people" (*suevery*); however, the Christian, agricultural, and rural contexts often seem to imply that Chulkov had the peasantry in mind in many of these discussions. He derided the "simpletons" who celebrated *Maslenitsa* (Butter Week), describing how they spent "almost the entire week with a table full of foods specifically prepared for that week," and this "in place of preparation for abstinence during the time of Lent."³⁰ In a separate article dedicated to "Thunder," he wrote that "simple people say that when there is thunder the prophet Elijah is riding around the sky on a flaming chariot and kills him who has angered God, the devil, who then takes cover totally and asks for shelter, addressing himself to various people, and especially to infants."³¹ An article on "Adam's Head" describes a "grass used to fumigate (*okurivaiut*) captives or nooses (*silki*), with which they catch wild ducks, but this fumigation must happen on Maundy Thursday, otherwise the fumigation will be inefficacious in the opinion of superstitious people, and the nooses will not catch."³² Despite few explicit references to peasantry, the Christian and rural contexts implicit in these passages suggest a peasant setting.

Chulkov's treatment of Russian Orthodox peasants is a good testing ground for his ideas about Christianity and its relationship to historical progress. In a passage quoted above, Chulkov made clear that "the majority" of people in the world had "been liberated" from superstition, suggesting that the remaining "superstitious people" in the world were

²⁹ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 45.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

remainders of an inevitable historical progress.³³ As Christians, Orthodox peasants had the potential to cultivate a positive moral impulse, but they could be (and had been) easily corrupted by ignorance or superficial adherence to ritual. Indeed, for Chulkov one of the primary corrosive features of superstition was that those who fell under its sway still believed themselves to be in the right. “With some sins man recognizes himself as a sinner,” declares the *Dictionary’s* epigraph, “but with superstition it seems that he renders service to God, and thus when dying he thinks of himself as someone who will be saved.”³⁴ In other words, believing oneself to be Christian was not enough to achieve salvation; but it was a step in the right direction.

The implicit explanations offered by Chulkov as to why Orthodox Christian peasants remained under the shadow of superstitious beliefs are varying and sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, at times he suggested that these superstitions are the remnants of pagan belief. An illustrative example can be found in an article on “Koliada,” “considered a god of peace,” who was worshipped as “an idol in Ancient Kyiv.” Practitioners of this superstition celebrated Koliada on December 24, “with games, revelry and feasts, for which they have not stopped practicing this custom.” Clearly, Chulkov saw this contemporary superstition as a remnant of a bygone time. “Even now,” he went on, “in certain cities and villages they continue to honor the idol of Koliada, even without the practice of idolatrous customs.”³⁵ Those who have shed idolatrous customs, in other words, could still be found practicing the remnants of past superstitious beliefs. Describing funeral practices, he wrote that “Ancient Slavs had funeral feasts of food and drink at graves, so that now many in certain cities and in villages do this, bringing pies, pancakes, pastries, thin pancakes, white bread rolls, and so on to the grave.”³⁶ In another article he recalled how “in ancient times, that is, in the time of idolatry, Slavs brought tribute to lakes, rivers and springs, and in rare cases they threw people into the water.” He went on to recount how, “in memory” of this ancient practice, “even now many superstitious people pour water into a river, a lake or a well if someone has slept through the morning on the first day of saints’ weeks and on other holidays.”³⁷ The antiquated quality of Russian peasantry was demonstrated to Chulkov by their links to the pagan past.

In other parts of the text, however, he eschewed links to paganism and discussed contemporary superstition in unambiguously Christian terms. Witchcraft, for example, emerged as related to antiquated beliefs derived from Christian cosmologies. In the article on “witches” (*ved’mi*) he wrote that “simpletons (*prostaki*) and charlatans claim that such people exist, especially old women, who by use of certain ointments and somersaults through twelve knives, turn into great beasts and birds, and especially into wolves, swine, magpies, and bales of hay.”³⁸ In a separate article entitled “Fortune-tellers, Witches, black magicians, sorcerers, magi and Magicians” (*Vorozhei, kolduny, chernoknizhniki, charodei, volkhvy, i kudesniki*), Chulkov defined these various synonyms for witch as those who “by the

³³ Chulkov, *Slovar’ ruskikh sueverii*, pref. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pref. 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 184-186.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 217-218.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

use of some grasses, roots, and incantations on wine, oil, and water, heal various sicknesses or worsen them." Notably, this understanding of witchcraft drew much more from early modern European and Muscovite notions of *maleficium* than it did from notions of paganism.³⁹ In fact, at times he made the Christian context of this particular superstition explicit, such as when he wrote that witches "claim to be acquainted with devils. They conclude a contract with them, and they receive assistance from them in everything relating to fortune and misfortune."⁴⁰ In addition to demonstrating Chulkov's understanding that witchcraft as a superstition could appear in a Christian context, this also highlights the absorption of the western European "Satanic pact" trope—one which was absent in seventeenth-century Muscovite witchcraft accusations—on the part of the Europeanized Russian elite.⁴¹ Elsewhere, Chulkov described a form of divination that involved a "maiden" sitting in front of a mirror, placing the mirror and a candle on a table before reciting the words, "*betrothed mummer, come to me to eat dinner.*" The mirror was supposed to fog up, at which point the maiden would clean it off "with a towel prepared especially for this." About five minutes later, "finally someone comes and looks through her shoulder at the mirror; and when the bride observes all the lines on his face, then she will cry out *keep away from this place*: then the devil (*d'iavol'*), who took on the image of her bridegroom, disappears, and from that time the maiden knows exactly who her bridegroom will be."⁴² Again, the Christian context and the influence of western European tropes about magic (here evidenced by the use of the Latin-origin "*d'iavol'*") are obvious here.

Ultimately, as we have seen, for Chulkov the superstitious beliefs and behaviors of Orthodox peasants compromised their self-professed commitment to true Christian faith. Still, where superstitions appeared among the peasantry, whether from historical links to paganism or from heretical Christian beliefs, they were an aberration and an exception to a universal and inevitably historical process. It is worth noting that while I have focused here on passages that reflect discussion of superstitious Orthodox subjects specifically, the vague category of "superstitious people" is a capacious one, and Orthodox peasants were rarely given explicit mention. There is not any space in the dictionary specifically dedicated to discussing superstition among this population. The reader is left to deduce from the context that some of these examples are drawn from ostensibly Christian populations. In the following section, I will summarize Chulkov's discussion of the non-Orthodox and non-Russian subjects of the Russian Empire, who receive much more focused and explicit attention in the text. Comparing the *Dictionary's* treatment of these respective groups

³⁹ For a respected overview of early modern witch hunts in Europe see Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 1987). For a comprehensive overview of witchcraft trials in early modern Muscovy see Valerie Kivelson, *Desperate Magic: The Moral Economy of Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁴⁰ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 48.

⁴¹ Valerie A. Kivelson, "Lethal Convictions: The Power of a Satanic Paradigm in Russian and European Witch Trials," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 6:1 (2011): 56.

⁴² Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 119-120. Italics in original.

illuminates details about Chulkov's imagined geography and the social hierarchies in which Chulkov sought to fashion himself.⁴³

3. Non-Orthodox Subjects of the Russian Empire

Chulkov imagined subjects of the empire from non-Orthodox confessions as extraordinarily vulnerable to superstition. In a passage quoted above about the pagan god Koliada, worshipped as an idol in "ancient Kyiv," Chulkov wrote that some contemporaries "have not stopped practicing this custom, [now dedicated] to the idol Tura."⁴⁴ This reference to Tura, drawn from the Chuvash pantheon, reflects the general slipperiness in Chulkov's presentation between various pagan pantheons, which sometimes appear analogous to and interchangeable with each other. In the article "Idol," he described the object as "a block of wood made by human hands that was considered by ancient idolaters to be gods known by various names and appearances. Aside from those with human appearances there were those idols, *now considered pagan*, of wood, beast, bird, and so on."⁴⁵ Clearly, contemporary pagans and ancient idolaters were linked in Chulkov's imagination.

Elsewhere, he suggested that the ancient Slavic Gods still had sway among the non-Russian pagans of the empire. Discussing Polkan, a centaur-like creature "recognized as a demi-God by the Slavs," he went on to say that "this kind of made-up monster was recognized by the ancient peoples; but the contemporary Chuchki believe that on some islands remote from them, there live people with the tails of dogs, and others have the legs of ravens."⁴⁶ This is but one example of his propensity to compare the contemporary beliefs of the Russian Empire's colonized peoples with the beliefs of ancient Slavs. In his article "Wood Goblin" (*Leshii*), Chulkov wrote that "these monsters were considered by Ancient Slavs to be forest gods," adding that in the present day "the Votiaks [Udmurts, a Finno-Ugric tribe] call the wood goblin Alida and believe that he lives in the forest." Confusingly, Chulkov sometimes explained the superstitions of non-Slavic peoples with reference to ancient Slavic pagan ideas, presenting these contemporary superstitions as a vestige of a pre-Christian past.

The ambiguous relationship between non-Orthodox contemporaries and the Slavic past is also evident in his discussion of magic, witchcraft, and divination. He discussed magical practices in a series of articles entitled "Wizards" (*Volshebniki*), "Fortune-Telling" (*Vorozhba*), "Sorcerers" (*Charodei*), "The Possessed" (*Klikushki*), and "Shamans" (*Shamany*). Aside from shamanism, each of these terms have indigenous Slavic roots and had long been ascribed to magic practitioners in Slavic contexts.⁴⁷ It is noteworthy, then, that Chulkov's

⁴³ The term "Imagined Geography" is drawn from Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 54.

⁴⁴ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 184-186.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 168-169. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 223-224. The ethnonym refers to the Siberian indigenous people native to the Chukchi Peninsula, the shores of the Chukchi Sea, and the Bering Sea region of the Arctic Ocean.

⁴⁷ For an overview of magical practices in Russia see W. F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight: Magic in Russia* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). For an overview of magic and witchcraft in

discussion of these magic-related terms focuses almost exclusively on non-Russian contexts, despite the brief mention of Satanic pacts. Much of the space dedicated to these magical categories details magical practices by non-Orthodox peoples under the rubric of recognizably Slavic terms for magical activity. The "Wizards" article, for example, details a ritual of blessing observed by the Sami people involving the beating of drums.⁴⁸ The discussion of fortune-telling begins with a claim that "Gypsies (*tsygany*) in this trade enjoy a great deal of advantage, and our simple folk always believe the Gypsies are great experts at divination, not seeing that they deceive them, steal from them, and that their words never come true."⁴⁹ The five-page article "Sorcerer" is dedicated entirely to a discussion of Samoyed idolatry, eschewing the Slavic context of the term altogether.⁵⁰ The article on "Shaman" also deals exclusively with non-Russian magic, in this case with a focus on Kamchadals.⁵¹ The mention of Satanic pacts, in fact, is followed by a brief summary of Kyrgyz sorcery, where Chulkov wrote that "there are seven ranks of sorcerers understood among the Kyrgyz," for example the "falcha," who can "predict [the future] from a book and according to the stars, but this art is considered a science."⁵² The seamless transition from the context of Orthodox inner Russia to the non-Orthodox periphery suggests an equivalency between the superstitious witchcraft belief of the Orthodox and non-Orthodox peoples of the empire.

Yet elsewhere he emphasized the foreign origins of superstitious beliefs and seemed fascinated by the absurd and amusing details of non-European cultures. One useful example of this dynamic is Chulkov's discussion of Kalmyk cosmology, under the article on "Faith." By his account, Kalmyks believed in "many worlds such as this visible one, and they describe a lower abyss, believing that it was not created by anyone, but came on its own from the eons." Chulkov's reference to the absence of a creator suggests an implicit comparison with the cosmology of Christianity. He went on to mock the absurdity of their belief, writing that "their thoughts penetrate this void so deeply that they have found a way to measure it and believe it to be six million one hundred sixteen thousand *beres* in width and depth."⁵³ The ironic use of the scientific language of measurement works to emphasize the absurdity of this foreign metaphysical belief. According to Chulkov, "Ukir Tutup," one of the "four large worlds" in which the Kalmyks apparently believed, was named "from the fact that no other livestock can be found there besides cows; for in Mongolian *Ukir* means cow."⁵⁴ As these passages suggest, the foreign and oriental character of some superstitious beliefs served for Chulkov as both an explanation and a source of amusement regarding the superstitions of non-Orthodox peoples.

In several places, he depicted non-Russians as having superficial contact with Orthodoxy but lacking the capacity to comprehend the true spirit of its beliefs and practices.

Russia in the eighteenth century see E. B. Smilianskaia, *Volshebnyki, bogokhul'niki, eretiki: narodnaia religioznost' i 'dukhovnye prestupleniia' v Rossii XVIII v.* (Moscow: Indrik, 2003).

⁴⁸ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 45-46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 255-260.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 264-269.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

In his article on “Christmas,” for example, he referred to the Mordvins, a term for a number of Uralic tribal peoples within the Russian Empire, writing that “every Sunday, and especially on this day [Christmas] the Mordvins bring birds, pastries, and beverages to Russian Saints, about whom they have no understanding.”⁵⁵ The Mordvins could go through the motions of Christianity, or worship signs of the Christian faith, but he figured this as benignly superficial at best, and corrupting idolatry at worst. As with the Slavic peasants, the historical links to paganism among non-Russians was a significant problem for Chulkov that compromised the Christian practice of these peoples. The Chuvash and Mordvins, for example, “although enlightened through holy baptism, still have families among them who live according to the old faith, and it is the rare village in which one would not find visible remnants of their former pilgrimage.”⁵⁶ Indeed, as he wrote elsewhere, “there are still those regions (*oblasti*) in the Russian Empire where idolatry has not been fully extirpated.”⁵⁷ Even where he conceded contact with Christianity among non-Orthodox peoples, Chulkov still emphasized differences and the supposed inability of these peoples to meet the Enlightened European man at his level of knowledge and civilization.

Whether originating in local ancient paganism or in foreign absurdities, superstitious practices among non-Orthodox peoples were, in Chulkov’s view, a result of a failure to properly cultivate knowledge and virtue. Recounting the burial practices of the “Votiaks,” he wrote that “their opinion about human souls is in accord with that of the Cheremis, and their burial customs display the same ignorance, which is peculiar to all nations under the shadow of idol-worship and led by the urge for empty and foolish superstition.”⁵⁸ At times, Chulkov seemed to suggest that Slavic presence among non-Orthodox peoples had a civilizing effect, such as his discussion of a monthly Kamchadal ritual that was reduced to an annual event after the arrival of Russian presence in Kamchatka.⁵⁹ The Kamchadals had also given way on their marriage traditions: where previously they had a strict prohibition on the remarrying of widows, Chulkov wrote that they had apparently grown more flexible in this regard due to the continued presence of Russian-speaking Cossacks.⁶⁰ Still, as in some of the examples mentioned above, Chulkov displayed some skepticism about the ability of Kamchadals to adapt to modern (i.e. European) ways, “for according to their opinion it is better to die and not live than to live not according to their customs, from which frequent suicides occur.”⁶¹

Clearly, these passages reflect a certain anxiety on the part of Chulkov regarding imperial encounters with non-Orthodox peoples in the territory of the empire. As we have seen, there were subtle differences in Chulkov’s understanding of non-Orthodox peoples’ relationship to the Enlightenment narratives of historical progress, and an implicit skepticism about their ability to adopt an Enlightened worldview. Although calling oneself Christian was not enough to ensure Enlightenment in Chulkov’s mind, his only references to the stubborn refusal or inability of “superstitious people” to share in the epistemological

⁵⁵ Chulkov, *Slovar’ ruskikh sueverii*, 235.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

spoils of historical progress were in reference to the non-Orthodox peoples. Unlike in the case of the superstitious Orthodox peasants, Chulkov largely portrayed non-Orthodox peoples as having no desire to adopt modern, Enlightened beliefs and customs.

Alongside Chulkov's taxonomy of superstitions is a subtle assessment of the relative distance between savagery and civilization that would need to be traversed in order for his "superstitious" subjects to be "liberated" from the shackles of the past. While I do not claim that Chulkov's worldview is coherent, his repeated comparisons of Orthodox and non-Orthodox "superstitious people" show that he believed non-Orthodox peoples to be extraordinarily resistant to the Enlightenment values whose opposite was signified by superstition. This offers insight into the ambiguous religious and western/secular meanings of Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Russian culture, mentioned above. In Chulkov's worldview, the global movement to "liberate" the world from superstition began in the Christian world and saw its fiercest resistance outside of it. From this perspective, the Enlightenment of Christianity and the Enlightenment of the *philosophes* were part of the same grand and progressive historical movement.

For Chulkov, as I have alluded to above, superstition was a historical problem. But superstitious moderns were the most historically problematic of all, as they represented the remainder of a process of liberation from the bondage of ignorance, a process in which Chulkov fashioned himself as an advocate and participant. In order to afford a clearer picture of his understanding of contemporary superstition, however, it is necessary to attend to the question of gender.

4. Women

As we have seen, the narrative of historical progress undergirding Chulkov's understanding of superstition positioned him as a fundamentally modern, rational, and Enlightened Orthodox Russian man. Understanding the place of women in this schema reveals yet another aspect of Chulkov's hierarchical imagination: although he remarked on women and their superstitions across time and across cultures (ancients, moderns, pagans, Christians), there seems to be little distinction between the irrational proclivities of women in antiquity and modernity. Thus, women appear in the dictionary as a site of transhistorical irrationality and as a social force requiring containment in the service of Enlightenment.

Educated men in the eighteenth century were consistently captivated with the question of women's position among supposedly primitive or savage societies. As Silvia Sebastiani has written, the Enlightenment view of civilization's relationship to the savage "implied changes not only in modes of subsistence and laws, but also in domestic arrangements, which resulted in the improvement of women's status, with the introduction of monogamous marriage and the moralization of gender relationships."⁶² The character of sexual and conjugal relations, then, was a measuring stick for Enlightenment's progress against the darkness, and eighteenth-century historians displayed a real preoccupation with the differences between "savage" and "civilized" gendered relationships.

⁶² Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, 17.

Women's supposed vulnerability to superstition, then, was a historical as well as social problem for Enlightenment thinkers. Male Enlighteners understood women to be naturally less rational than men, but at the same time, women's supposed kindness and heightened emotional faculties were imagined by many as a kind of "civilizing force" whose historical effect was a "transformation from brutal oppression to gentle equality."⁶³ Nonetheless, women's role in civilization and the extent to which their alleged irrationality was an obstacle for the forward movement of historical progress was a controversial issue debated by many Enlightenment thinkers. As Sebastiani writes, "the ambiguous destiny of the savage, who had not yet become civil and remained anchored in the first stage, held true for women as well: their inscription in a historic discourse held the promise of emancipation, but their own nature seemed to confine them to the private sphere."⁶⁴ Thus, Chulkov's mentions of women and gender in this text reflect his own efforts to work through unsettled philosophical and historical issues around which there was no real Enlightened consensus.

One key set of articles dealing with gender are those relating to marriage, reproduction, or other customs involving gender relations. Such articles are numerous in Chulkov's *Dictionary*. In an article called "To Smother a Baby," for example, he wrote that "women [who are] careless, and thus sleep heavily, or [who are] drunk, often crush [their] babies by pressing them down on the sheets." In such cases, the infants' souls were supposedly unable to ascend to heaven and, as Chulkov noted, "this brought about a funny, still unbelievable superstition." According to "simpletons," such a bereaved mother had to do the following:

[She had to] stand in the church alone for three nights, making an outline in a circle with chalk, the outline of which must be taught by a clergyman. On the first, night demons pass by her and, carrying her baby, they show it to her. On the second night, they bring it and crush it as they pass by her, beat and bite it, and tell her that if she only leaves the circle then they would give her back her baby; and as soon as she steps out of it, she will be the prey of devils (*d'iavolov*). On the third night, they torture it unspeakably, exhorting her to leave the circle, but when she leaves, they will torture it to death. By the cock's crow, they disappear and leave the mother with the dead baby, which she will then show everyone and carry out the needed burial.⁶⁵

Here, Chulkov's discussion of superstition among women echoes familiar anxieties about maternity and reproduction that characterized the culture of witchcraft accusation in much of central Europe.⁶⁶ Elsewhere, he wrote that "superstitious old women collect locks under the threshold [of the church] and when the bride and groom leave the church, and when

⁶³ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 7.

⁶⁴ Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, 17.

⁶⁵ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 161-162.

⁶⁶ Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994), Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

they step over an unlocked lock, then at that moment they pick it up and lock it, and they throw the key into a river or a well so that the husband will live agreeably with his wife."⁶⁷ In his discussion of demonic possession (*klikushestvo*) he described "possessed (*vdokhnovennyya*) or cursed women who, coming into a rage, talk nonsense and sometimes make prophecies." In one passage from his article on "Schism," dedicated to the emergence of Old Belief in the seventeenth-century, he wrote that "the schismatics choose wealthy homes, rather than poor ones, and people who are easily persuaded, who are in essence simpletons, and in particular the female sex."⁶⁸ These mentions of specifically female superstition demonstrate the degree to which women's belief and practices presented a historical problem for Chulkov.

In his discussion of the empire's less Enlightened peoples, Chulkov often used the treatment of women as a measuring stick for the relative degree of civilization achieved by a given nation. This is consistent with much Enlightenment writing on women, which was largely characterized by a preoccupation with the place of women among "savage" nations.⁶⁹ As Marianna Muravyeva has shown, the Russian Empire was no exception to this tendency among eighteenth-century intellectuals to see marriage and nuptial practices as reflective of a civilization's progressive historical development.⁷⁰ In his article on "Marriage" Chulkov detailed the nuptial customs of Iaitsk and Don Cossacks, Kamchadals, Mordvins, Chuvash, Kalmyks, Votiaki, Kyrgyz, Tatars, Bashkirs, ancient Russians, "Little Russians" (Ukrainians), and merchants. He reported that Iaitsk Cossacks observed a period of up to twenty weeks before the wedding during which "the convinced bride gathers with [women] friends every evening, they sing songs, dance, and play with the young men (*s molodtsami*)." During this period "the bridegroom can almost treat her like a husband treats his wife." He described some of the garments and jewelry required for the wedding and concluded by offering that "among these Cossacks there used to be a custom that if someone no longer wanted to keep his wife, he would give her away by sending her off to the town square."⁷¹ Among the Don Cossacks, by contrast, "the bridegroom goes on horseback after his wife and the horse under him is covered in bells so that the bride can hear her bridegroom's arrival."⁷² Notably, it is unclear what precisely linked these customs to superstition in Chulkov's understanding. Particularly in the discussion of Cossacks mentioned above, Chulkov did not describe magical beliefs or even customs associated with paganism. Instead, he included this information because of his Enlightened belief that relations between women and men could be used as a yard stick for determining a relative degree of civilization.

Elsewhere, Chulkov dwelled on aspects of marriage practices that he found troubling or barbaric. For example, he reported that Kamchadals "usually look for their brides in another, and not in their own village (*ostrozhke*), move to live there, and announcing their intentions to the father or mother of the bride [they] work for some time, showing their

⁶⁷ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 161.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁶⁹ Sebastiani, *The Scottish Enlightenment*, 133-162.

⁷⁰ Marianna Muravyeva, "Abduction of Women in Early Modern Russia: Modernizing the Empire," *Russian History* 43:3-4 (2016): 338-371.

⁷¹ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 6-7.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 7.

boldness and dexterity, and serving everyone as a servant (*kholopa*)—most of all his future father-in-law, mother-in-law, and bride—then demands permission to take the bride.”⁷³ Although Chulkov did not explicitly condemn these practices, his focus on customs where mutual consent was apparently lacking suggests that this was one way in which Chulkov identified primitive or savage people’s practices that differed from his own and those of his Enlightened contemporaries.

Another noteworthy discussion of women in the *Dictionary* is in the article on “Fashion,” where he critiqued the perceived decadence and effeteness of elite urban society.⁷⁴ Chulkov excoriated the superficial obedience of those who slavishly adhere to “such rules that anyone can follow if they dare: and whoever objects will thus be chased out of society or labeled as an eternal fool.”⁷⁵ His examples of the corrosive impacts of fashion are focused on women. “Here red hair is considered ugly,” he wrote, “but in the mountains of the Caucasus it is an excellent beauty mark for women, such that they cover it in a special ointment, like they blacken teeth here.” Whereas “Persians and other pagan peoples who have settled in Russia wear a ring in the nose through both nostrils,” Russian women “wear earrings on their ears.” Unlike Russian women who “pile straps on their dresses,” Chulkov reported that Kamchadals “add embroideries to their own skin, and their faces as well, in place of these straps.”⁷⁶ Here, we see direct examples of the imaginative links between women and savagery, described so eloquently by Sebastiani, that characterized Enlightenment thought regarding gender and its relationship to civilization. Like with pagans and idolators with whom much of the volume is concerned, Chulkov’s implicit claim was that women’s proclivity toward fashion exerted an irrational and arbitrary power over society and slowed the forward march of historical progress.

Thus, women emerge from Chulkov’s *Dictionary* as a transhistorical site of irrationality whose effect was tyranny over everyday customs. He lamented that even if “a professor..., a person of good human qualities” failed to meet the standards of the purveyors of fashion, “then at that very minute they call him an ignoramus and a fool.” In his view, clearly, fashion distorted one’s ability to distinguish between legitimate knowledge and superstition, and thus worked to perpetuate historical ignorance. He concluded this passage about the wrongly maligned, unfashionable professor with an exhortation: “about all of this and more, understand (*razumevai*).”⁷⁷ This last term, *razumevai*, is drawn from Old Church Slavonic and alludes to Job 37:14: “Stop and understand (*razumevai*) the miraculous works of God.” It is also worth noting, however, that the root of this word, *razum*, was a standard word in eighteenth-century Russian to signify “reason” in the Enlightenment sense of the word. This passage was likely meant to amuse the reader with its stylistic clash between discussion of uncivilized superstition and the sacral, elevated quality of Church Slavonic. Even so, it highlights the ambiguously religious and secular contexts of Chulkov’s critique of

⁷³ Chulkov, *Slovar’ ruskikh sueverii*, 7-8.

⁷⁴ This portrayal of elite decadence, largely understood as the result of unrestrained French influence at the court (*voltarianstvo*), was tied to nascent discussions on the Russian national character. See Hans Rogger, *National Consciousness in Eighteenth Century Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁷⁵ Chulkov, *Slovar’ ruskikh sueverii*, 210-211.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

superstition. Women's apparent interest in fashion reflected a feminized failure to "understand," both in the religious sense of comprehending the truth of the gospel and in the Enlightened sense of deploying reason and sensibility to understand the phenomena of the material world.

Like peasants and non-Orthodox subjects of the empire, therefore, women represented for Chulkov an example of contemporary superstition which defied the general process of liberation from ignorance that he laid out in the *Dictionary's* introduction. Unlike other supposedly superstitious groups of people, however, women's vulnerability in this regard was not a result of their ties to the pagan past, nor of a slavish adherence to ancient foreign customs. Instead, women appear in the *Dictionary* as a transhistorical site of irrationality and a general problem for the historical progress of Enlightened civilization. As his inclusion of examples from across time and across different contexts demonstrate, women's supposed irrationality and credulity was a problem not only among savages, but also among educated European moderns. Chulkov's choice to critique women's superstition even in his own social milieu contributed to his own project of self-fashioning by positioning himself as a man endowed with superior faculties of sensibility and Enlightened reason.

5. Old Believers

Like the apparently superstition and fashionable women of elite society, Old Believers appear in Chulkov's *Dictionary* as superstitious moderns who have failed to benefit from the process of historical progress that ran from early Christianity to the philosophy of the Enlightenment. As was the case in his treatment of certain non-Orthodox peoples, Chulkov attributed a foreign origin to the schismatics' misapprehension of the truth. "The beginnings of the coming of schismatics followed the time of the great Prince Vladimir I," he explained, "for soon after his reign, a certain Armenian by the name of Vlasii composed a book about the faith with many vanities, and they increased as a result of the correction of church books under Patriarch Nikon."⁷⁸ As this mention of Nikon suggests, Chulkov was surely aware that the Old Belief movement was precipitated by Church reforms in the mid-seventeenth century. His decision to locate the origins of the schism in the time of Kyivan Rus' is thus all the more striking.

Chulkov represented Old Believers as especially duplicitous and the prevalence of superstitious belief among them as a result of conscious manipulation on the part of the movement's progenitors.⁷⁹ As mentioned above, Chulkov wrote that "to attract people to their madness the schismatics choose wealthy homes, rather than poor ones, and people who are easily persuaded, who are in essence simpletons, and in particular the female sex."⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 228.

⁷⁹ It seems that Chulkov drew many details in his portrayal of Old Believers from Dmitrii Rostovskii's well-known writing condemning schismatics, entitled *Rozysk o raskol'nicheskoi Brynskoii vere*, from the early eighteenth century. Discussion of this tract can be found in Evgenii Akel'ev, *Russkii misopogon: Petr I, bradobritie I desiat' millionov "Moskovitov"* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2022). I am indebted to Dr. Ernest Zitser for this observation.

⁸⁰ Chulkov, *Slovar' ruskikh sueverii*, 228.

He clearly located the epicenter of Old Belief among elites who manipulate the “simple people” with excessive performances of piety. “Simpletons,” Chulkov wrote, “are greatly surprised by this life of theirs [Old Believers], their fasting, prayers, and gentle temper, and consider them great saints.” Innocent peasants were seduced by the fact that Old Believers “pray with great diligence and lamentation, taking questions from holy writings, and with great tenderness and with a pious and pallid expression and, sometimes, shedding tears.”⁸¹ In an article on “Cranberries” he wrote that “when schismatics from the Bryn’ forest aren’t able to convince someone of their heresy through flattery, they give [them] a cranberry, soaked in some poisons, which makes whoever eats it invariably have a desire to go to the small monasteries of Bryn,” as a result of which the schismatics’ targets go into “a frenzy of the mind” and “throw themselves into it [Old Belief] for it appears to them as paradise and angels sit on it.”⁸² Interestingly, Chulkov’s treatment of the peasantry in the context of Old Belief figured them as clay to be molded, so to speak; their superstitious beliefs in this regard could be explained by the ill intentions of malicious charlatans.

In his description of the specific beliefs of schismatics, Chulkov emphasized their comical absurdity. He enumerated those who were, according to Old Belief, condemned to damnation: “those who don’t recognize the holiness in octagonal mustaches and beards, and those who don’t believe that the head was given to us by nature solely and only to have a place for a beard, in which one’s soul resides,” in addition to “whoever drinks tea and coffee, snuffs, smokes, or puts tobacco behind their lips, whoever eats olives or capers, lamprey, oysters, eel, hares, lobsters, pigeons, sausages (*sosiski*), sauces, jelly, [or] sausages (*kolbasy*),” and whoever fails to “believe that there are witches (*kolduny*), forest trolls, devils, curses, baba iagas, werewolves, possessed women, fortune-tellers, and walking dead.” Elsewhere, he wrote that schismatics considered their beards “more important than all of their members and dearer than their own heads, thinking that with beards they present the image and likeness of God, not understanding that God is a spirit (*bog est’ dukh*), so our flesh cannot have the smallest resemblance to him.”⁸³ For Chulkov, the amusing absurdity of Old Belief was the result not of the cultural vestiges of paganism, but of duplicity on the one hand and grave intellectual error on the other.

As superstitious contemporaries whose beliefs seemed to have emerged in the mid-seventeenth century, Old Believers fit awkwardly into the historical schema that undergirded Chulkov’s understanding of superstition and its relationship to Enlightenment. Perhaps the reputation for zealotry among Old Believers made it harder for Chulkov to attribute their eccentricities to the remnants of paganism. As in his discussion of many non-Orthodox subjects of the empire, Chulkov explained this deviation from mainstream Orthodoxy as the result of a foreign intervention by a medieval Armenian. Although the “simpletons” among them had succumbed to Old Belief because they were deceived, Chulkov represented the core of the movement as consisting of duplicitous charlatans who could deceive the simple people into following them. Thus, paradoxically, Old Belief appears in Chulkov’s *Dictionary* as a moral problem that, like women’s inherent irrationality, was

⁸¹ Chulkov, *Slovar’ ruskikh sueverii*, 228-229.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

coincidental with modernity. As a result, according to this logic, these populations required a different kind of containment than the vestigial cultural deviations observed among peasants and non-Russians. Chulkov saw himself as appropriately skeptical about superstition, in contrast to women, peasants, and non-Russians; but he was also moral, in contrast to the duplicitous charlatans who propagated Old Belief.

Conclusion: Chulkov's Imperial Enlightenment

These five categories of Others are mine, not Chulkov's. The reason why I have focused on these categories is because each of them demonstrates an aspect of Chulkov's own self-fashioning. The implicit comparisons made legible through Chulkov's representation of various "superstitious" peoples show how the heterogeneous and varied subjects of the Russian Empire were ordered in his imagination. First, he displayed a vague sympathy toward Orthodox peasants and had a tendency to explain their supposed superstition as a result of gullibility. His treatment of non-Orthodox populations, however, reveals a subtle skepticism about their ability to comprehend the essence of Christianity or Enlightened reason.

As some historians have shown, the integration of Enlightenment ideas and practices in the Russian Empire was shaped in important ways by existing imperial institutions. This is evident in the ways in which religious leaders were able to deploy the language of Enlightenment in such a way that it shored up traditional institutions of ecclesiastical and imperial power.⁸⁴ In the late-eighteenth century, figures like Metropolitan Platon distinguished their own brand of Enlightened reason from the radical secular pronouncements emerging from the intellectual milieu of western Europe.⁸⁵

My reading of Chulkov suggests that this distinction between Orthodox Enlightenment and radical secular Enlightenment had its limits and was not operative across all contexts. He had absorbed many post-Reformation notions of religion and Enlightenment through the Russian Orthodox Church, which had integrated many important elements of Protestant theology over the course of the eighteenth century.⁸⁶ Superstition, in its valence as a vestige of paganism, was for Chulkov both a sign of insufficient comprehension of Christianity and a sign of insufficient exposure to the fruits of secular learning and the rationalist practices inherited from western Europe. For Chulkov, I argue, this was a distinction without a difference. The very distance of Chulkov's Others from his own civilized vantage point negated the importance of this distinction. Superstition, for Chulkov, was the opposite of Enlightenment, and in the imperial context he seemed to view the relative ability of subject peoples to comprehend Christianity and secular learning on a kind of spectrum. Proper Orthodox belief and practice and secular

⁸⁴ Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, "Thoughts on the Enlightenment and Enlightenment in Russia," *Journal of Modern Russian History and Historiography* 2:1 (1-26); Hamburg, *Russia's Path Toward Enlightenment*.

⁸⁵ Wirtschafter, *Religion and Enlightenment in Catherinian Russia*. On the Radical Enlightenment see Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2009.

⁸⁶ Andrey Ivanov, *A Spiritual Revolution: The Impact of Reformation and Enlightenment in Orthodox Russia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

learning both emerge as elements of civilization and Enlightenment toward which, in Chulkov's view, these superstitious people ought to gravitate in order to escape the shackles of ignorance. The act of writing the dictionary was at once a sign of Chulkov's sufficient understanding of religion and of his cultivated Enlightened reason. By ordering the empire's Others, Chulkov performed an act of integration for himself and his patrons into the cultural sphere of Enlightenment Europe.

These categories of Others reveal much about Chulkov's understanding of himself as an Orthodox Russian and as a member of European civilization. These were not contradictory categories in the mind of an educated Russian man in his position.⁸⁷ His ability to order the empire's Others projected a civilized quality onto the Russian Empire and thus strengthened imperial claims of legitimate power over uncivilized or savage populations. If Chulkov's *Dictionary* is not an expression of radical Enlightenment, it is surely an expression of colonial Enlightenment, and it is representative of the large body of Enlightenment-era literature that was oriented towards assimilating the uncivilized on the peripheries of Europe's eighteenth-century empires.⁸⁸ It is important not to lose sight of these imperial and colonial dimensions of Enlightenment thought in our assessment of the particularities of the Enlightenment in the Russian Empire.

As discussed above, some of the superstitious subjects of Chulkov's *Dictionary* appear uncivilizable. In addition to the non-Orthodox peoples, this also included women, who had avoided liberation from ignorance even in the civilized world because of their supposed gendered constitution. In this way, Chulkov also performed his inclusion in the world of Men of Letters. Clearly, he did not share the opinion of some Enlighteners that women's supposed gentleness had a civilizing effect on society. Women for Chulkov were comparable to the ignorant subjects on the periphery of the empire whose tendency toward superstition had to be contained.

Chulkov's text positioned him and his patrons as people with the capacity to evaluate the magnitude of civilizational development among the subjects of the empire. In this way, *The Dictionary* can be understood as an instrument of imperial Enlightenment. In addition to cataloging and ordering the strange and irrational beliefs of the empire's Others, it also provided amusement and education for the Enlightened (male) Russian reader. By eliciting amusement toward the absurdity of superstitious beliefs, Chulkov positioned himself and his implied readers as individuals who were Enlightened enough to laugh at superstitious beliefs, whereas the subjects of *The Dictionary* were tempted by them.

⁸⁷ Schönle and Zorin, *On the Periphery of Europe*, 69.

⁸⁸ Richard Vulpius, "Civilizing Strategies and the Beginning of Colonial Policy in the Eighteenth-Century Russian Empire," in *Enlightened Colonialism*, ed. Damien Tricoire, 113-132.