

Spiritual elders (*startsy*) are a quint-essential part of Russian Orthodox spirituality, yet scholars have given relatively little focus to them. Elders whose authority came not from their position within the institutional church but from their reputation for personal holiness were mediating agents between official and popular Orthodoxy. Acting as teachers, spiritual directors, counselors, and prophets, elders represented a particular form of ministry within the Church. The informal source of elders' authority meant that their position was often in conflict with the bureaucratized Synod.

While eldership re-emerged in the late eighteenth century as a relatively marginal phenomenon that had limited meaning within the monastic context, by the turn of the nineteenth century elders had developed into a symbol of Russian national spirituality. In Paert's highly readable book, she looks at both Imperial and Soviet Russia and examines the social and cultural contexts in which *startsy* operated, demonstrating how eldership was appropriated by both the elites and the lower classes.

A significant contribution to the debate about the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in modernizing Russian society, Paert's study shows that elders represented both the weaknesses and the strengths of Russian Orthodoxy's response to the challenges of modernity. *Spiritual Elders* promises to stimulate further discussion on the problems of spiritual authority, popular belief, the impact of a religious identity on a national one, and the interactions between church and society in the modern world.

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