



# Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy

*Irina Paert*

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## **Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy** Irina Paert

Spiritual elders (*starsy*) are a quintessential part of Russian Orthodox spirituality, yet scholars have given relatively little focus to them. Elders whose authority came not from their position within 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.

In her highly readable book, Paert looks at both Imperial and Soviet Russia and examines the social and cultural contexts in which *starsy* operated, demonstrating how eldership was appropriated by both elites and 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. Historians of Russia and scholars of Eastern Orthodoxy, as well as general readers of religious history, will find this book of great interest.

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