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Book Review: Isolde Thyrêt, Saint-making in Early Modern Russia: Religious Tradition and Innovation in the Cult of Nil Stolobenskii

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BOOK REVIEW

Isolde Thyrêt, *Saint-making in Early Modern Russia: Religious Tradition and Innovation in the Cult of Nil Stolobenskii*. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2019. xxvii, 721 pp. \$66.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-733040808

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Isolde Thyrêt's *Saint-Making in Early Modern Russia: Religious Tradition and Innovation in the Cult of Nil Stolobenskii* is a monumental work about the way in which Nil Stolobenskii, who lived in the first half of the sixteenth century in a remote spot in western Russia, became the object of an important cult in the Russian Orthodox Church. She organizes well several sorts of primary sources, including *vitae*, liturgical material, monastery financial records, and iconographic works to describe the way in which a rather obscure hermit named Nil became a widely known and venerated saint.

Thyrêt, who is an Associate Professor of History at Kent State University, describes her work as interdisciplinary, not wishing to limit herself to the available hagiographic and liturgical texts, but also seriously to study icons and manuscript illustrations of Nil that survive, as well as the financial books of the Nilov Monastery.

The Stolobenskii cult begins to develop and leave signs of its evidence about forty years after Nil's death. He had spent some time during the latter decades of his life on a deserted island in the Seliger River to the north and west of Moscow. During his own life he had attracted some attention, but it appears that solitude was his main purpose and the means by which he could attain a relationship with the divine. One might wonder at this point even whether a serious ascetic such as Nil would have been very unhappy with the cult that grew up around his name. Yes, there are miracles chronicled during his own life and posthumously. Indeed, it is the miracles that lead to the growth of his cult, but Nil, in his humility, might have thought himself unworthy of all the fuss.

Thyrêt begins the story with an examination of the *Vitae* that begin to appear at the end of the sixteenth century, the first by Filofei Pirogov. His working of the story follows closely the idea that Nil's hermetic life was the means and purpose of his life. It is only later that some hesychastic overtones are added to the hagiographical tradition, as well as the idea that Nil

actually meant to establish a monastery for hermits. We find Nil's pious parents only in later vitae. Thyrêt is careful to describe the ways in which Nil's hagiography grows in miracles and complexity. One of the leaders of the monastery, Nektarii, sometime Archbishop of Siberia, is involved in writing later versions of the *Vitae* and also of the liturgical hymns that celebrate Nil's life, miracles, and cult. It is interesting, as Thyrêt notes, that hagiographic data that appears in the liturgical commemorations, does not always agree with the *Vitae*. This is especially true as these sources develop.

The author notes that the Nilov Monastery and its leaders are careful to develop both local and all-Russian sponsorship and attention, in order to make the monastery an important part of the pilgrimage system of early modern Russia. It is quite noteworthy that Nektarii, with his high connections, both church and state, was able to put the Nilov Monastery into the list of those institutions that were supported by the Romanov family that came into power during the development of Nil's cult. At this point I would have said more about the political "Time of Troubles" of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and wonder whether and how the monks and the political dynasties needed each other for the attainment of their various goals. From the late years of Ivan IV (the Terrible), Boris Godunov, and the various false Dmitris until the establishment of the Romanovs it was important to have the Orthodox Church, and not only through its hierarchs, but also the monastic institutions, on its side.

Quite importantly, Thyrêt covers the iconographic developments surrounding Nil's cult. The icons are spread about Russia, in churches and museums, as well as in the United States and elsewhere. When she mentions that she has taken ten years to write this book, just finding the icons, hagiography, and liturgical works must have taken some amount of time. And once found, the Russian and Slavonic would have added difficulty to the task of interpretation. Illustrations in the *Vitae* are also important to describe the way in which the cult developed.

The financial records of the Nilov Monastery are mined by the author, especially for trying to make sense of the way in which the monastery related to the class structure of seventeenth century Russia. She does make the point that there seems to be a wide class basis for the cult. It is also important that the author shows the way in which the monastery recovered from the devastating fire of 1665 and how the "discovery" of Nil's relics in 1667 were important to that recovery.

Prof. Thyrêt takes us up into the early eighteenth century with some description also of the scholarship of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. She leaves an “Instead of a Conclusion” at the end of the text, challenging herself and others to do more work on the making of saints in Russia and how the sources can be examined to learn more.

I do wish that this volume was a bit shorter. The style is often wordy and I fear that people will be put off by its length. True, there is a lot of material to cover, but some of the phrasing is repetitive and the author’s attempt to put some variety in the way certain people and places are mentioned has resulted in just too much text. On the other hand, the apparatus, Notes and Bibliography, which are compendious, add excellent opportunities for the reader to investigate further the topics and sources of this work.