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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Afanas'ev, Aleksandr Nikolaevič

Author: Noack Christian

Afanas'ev, Aleksandr Nikolaevič

Afanas'ev was born in 1826 near Voronež in Southern Russia and studied law at Moscow University between 1844 and 1849. He then entered the employ of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' archival offices in Moscow, from which he was dismissed in 1862, due to contacts with Vasilij Ivanovič Kel'siev, an exiled Russian belonging to Aleksandr Herzen's circle in London. Between 1862 and 1871, the year of his death, he was tenuously employed by organs of local self-administration in Moscow that emerged in the wake of the Great Reforms. Afanas'ev earned fame as collector and ethnographical commentator of Russian folk tales. Dubbed "the Russian Grimm", he is seen as the most eminent adept of Grimm's "mythological school" in Russia.

During his years in Moscow Afanas'ev began to write for literary journals like *Sovremennik* and later *Otečestvennye zapiski* and collected manuscripts. On the basis of his rising fame he was invited by the ethnographic section of the Russian Geographical Society to publish their folktale archives, gathered in the preceding decades. From them, he selected (with additions from his own collection and that of the lexicographer Vladimir Dal') the tales published between 1855 and 1863 as *Narodnye Russkie Skazki* ("Russian folktales"). These included tales and themes (Vasilisa, Koščej the Immortal, the Firebird) which subsequently became a major inspiration for Russian artists (Bilibin, Vasnetsov) and composers (Rimskij-Korsakov's fairytale operas, Stravinskij's *Firebird* suite), as well as furnishing the literary scholar Vladimir Propp with a motif-based narratological model of the *Morphology of the folktale* (1928). However, the 1860 anthology of "Russian folk legends" (*Russkie narodnye legendy*) was censored as some of the popular outlooks on the veneration of the saints collided with views held by the Orthodox Church. Indeed, Afanas'ev was deeply interested in the ancient pagan culture of the Slavs and aimed at its reconstruction through the prism of folk tales and legends. He systematized his views in the three volumes of "The Slavs' poetic views on Nature" (*Poetičeskie vozrenija Slavijian na prirodu*), printed between 1865 and 1869. Contemporary critics (this being the heyday of literary realism) decried Afanas'ev Romantic, Grimm-derived conception as the projection of an intellectual largely ignorant of the actual living conditions and interest of the common folk. At the same time, poets like Nikolaj Nekrasov borrowed motifs for their populist poems from his collections. The openly erotic character of some tales made publication in the Russian Empire impossible; the first prints emerged in the 1980s only.

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