

Spring 2009

# Review Of "Slavic Folklore: A Handbook" By N. Kononenko

Sibelan E.S. Forrester

*Swarthmore College*, [sforres1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:sforres1@swarthmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-russian>



Part of the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Sibelan E.S. Forrester. (2009). "Review Of "Slavic Folklore: A Handbook" By N. Kononenko". *Slavic And East European Journal*.

Volume 53, Issue 1. 135-136.

<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-russian/17>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Russian at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

Review

Author(s): Sibelan Forrester

Review by: Sibelan Forrester

Source: *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (SPRING 2009), pp. 135-136

Published by: American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40651091>

Accessed: 06-04-2016 19:23 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Slavic and East European Journal*

Natalie Kononenko. *Slavic Folklore: A Handbook*. Greenwood Folklore Handbooks. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007. Glossary. Bibliography. Web Resources. Index. xvi + 209 pp. \$55.00 (cloth).

Folktales have become a popular topic for Slavic department courses at the undergraduate level. It is a boon when actual folklorists provide accessible, informative materials for use by students and teachers. Natalie Kononenko's *Slavic Folklore: A Handbook* is suitable for use in survey courses as well as for in-depth folklore studies. The volume is especially strong in genres like memorates, fabulates and material culture, often less familiar than folktales to non-specialists. It includes a helpful note on Aarne-Thompson Tale Type numbers, definitions and classifications of folk genres, examples and texts, an overview of major scholarly works and approaches, informative bibliographies at each section's end, and other scholarly apparatus, including a particularly valuable glossary of terms and genres. Numerous photographs and illustrations, many taken by the author, enliven the pages. Kononenko is well traveled and knowledgeable; the book seems to draw on her own introductory courses on Slavic folklore as well as on her own research experience.

Much of the handbook's coverage is rich and satisfying. The introduction ties Slavic folklore to the field of folklore in general, as Kononenko outlines the Slavic pre-Christian pantheon, referring to archeological finds and more recent artifacts of material culture. She clearly defines various genres and distinguishes scholarly from popular terminology for particular types of texts or narratives. Folklorists specializing in other areas will learn that the Slavic trickster, the fox, is female, though most traditions have male (or male-ish) trickster figures. The chapter "Contexts" introduces a number of major Russian and Ukrainian writers, underlining the importance of folklore in literature and suggesting which authors' work would fit alongside folklore in a course. The chapter also lists composers, visual artists, and figures from recent popular culture, as well as some heterogeneous web resources. Kononenko makes frequent and informative reference to Slavic diaspora communities in North America (e.g., 67–68), mentioning how Ukrainians outside Ukraine combine traditional garb with contemporary garments as they mark and celebrate their ethnic identity (e.g., tucking an elaborately embroidered blouse into a stylish modern skirt). She frequently speculates on the practical value of traditional practices or narratives. She outlines the Soviet period with respect to censorship, "fakelore," and officially sponsored folk ensembles or schools. Kononenko takes full advantage of her connections in the Old Country and frequent visits there: she is superbly observant and descriptive. She considers forms that traditional folklorists may scorn, such as urban legends and current neo-pagan cults (which are not folklore themselves, but draw on it heavily). Tracing the complex interactions of folk culture, popular culture, remnants of Soviet official culture, and incursions of Western values and objects illustrates the simultaneous tenacity and mutability of folk forms.

Eventually Kononenko makes the important point that, in the post-socialist period, "Lack of data allows the construction of an imagined, wished-for past that can be presented as a model for the future" (136). Her presentation of material culture is always strong, though it is not always clear when she is talking about Russian examples and when Ukrainian; at times, she generalizes "the Slavs" while citing details that must have originated in a particular time and place. It is a challenge to balance local, particular details, the lifeblood of folklore, with the broader "Slavic" picture.

The handbook's problems are fewer than its virtues, but they are often irritating. The introduction lumps all Slavs behind the Iron Curtain and asserts that most Slavic languages are written in Cyrillic (xiii), which is simply not true: about half of Slavic languages use Cyrillic. Kononenko drops some very questionable assertions about etymology and other topics in passing. "Because his image is so striking, Simargl was popular on jewelry" (10)—or could his image be striking because people wanted their protective amulets to be handsome? After all, the winged dog Simargl was not based on an everyday, visible creature. Kononenko cites doubts about the au-

thenticity of the *Igor Tale* and the *Book of Veles* as if the former were much more dubious than the latter, though most scholars would assert the opposite. Kononenko makes it clear that she knows Ukrainian and Russian folklore best, and indeed these dominate the book despite the more inclusive title. Of course, if Greenwood Press had published a handbook of Russian and Ukrainian folklore alone it is unlikely that handbooks for other Slavic cultures would follow. South and West Slavic materials appear occasionally, as in the informative section on the history of folklore collection in Poland (137 ff). The book is printed without diacritical marks (“junacke [*sic*] pesme” (39–42)), and the sections on Polish, Czech and South Slavic lack all diacritical marks. The neglect of proper spelling in Latin alphabets is balanced by careless proofreading in transliterated Cyrillic (“obraidnost” 144; “Dragomyzhskii” 155, “Doila” for “Dolia” 175). Would a student curious about the group “White Button” (169), cited only in English without naming any members, ever make it through the search engines to “Bijelo dugme”? These are unfortunate lapses in a book that contains so much correct, substantial and valuable information; the publisher should ensure better fact-checking and proofreading in the future.

A focus on Slavic folklore is, of course, appropriate in a book entitled *Slavic Folklore*, but the handbook would have profited from some reference to neighboring ethnic groups. Bohdan Khmelnytsky appears here only as a heroic rebel against the Polish-Lithuanian state in Ukrainian folklore (38), without mention of his role in pogroms, though that survived in lore all over Eastern Europe. Surely students and other readers would infer worthwhile things from the mutability of a single figure in the folklore of different groups.

Despite such shortcomings the handbook offers an admirable wealth of information, analysis, and interpretation. It is too expensive to assign as a required class text, but anyone who teaches or studies Slavic folklore should own it, and a copy should be on the library shelf of every institution where Slavic languages and literatures are taught.

*Sibelan Forrester, Swarthmore College*

Marina Frolova-Walker. *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2007. Glossary of names. Index. xiv + 402 pp. \$50.00 (cloth).

In her ambitious and cogently argued book, Marina Frolova-Walker revisits and reinterprets Russian musical nationalism. Although the book is replete with musical examples and some readers may be put off by the level of musicological fluency that seems necessary to understand the argumentation, those willing to skim over the technical passages will discover that the core cultural arguments are clear, even in the absence of professional musical knowledge. As most readers of *SE EJ* will not be professional musicologists, I will focus in this review on Frolova-Walker’s key points, leaving a discussion of the validity of her specifically musicological analyses to others.

The book opens with a short chapter discussing the process by which a Russian national character was created (in the clash between essentialists and constructivists Frolova-Walker is firmly on the side of the latter) during the first half of the nineteenth century. This is followed by an equally brief chapter contrasting the respective “fathers” of modern Russian music and poetry—Glinka and Pushkin. These chapters appear written primarily with musicologists in mind, as they go over well-trodden ground without providing many insights that will startle anyone with a good grasp of Russian cultural history. Worthwhile, however, is Frolova-Walker’s point that, while Russian literature consistently privileged melancholy as the essence of Russian music (witness Gogol’s description of Russian song in *Dead Souls* and the winning song in Turgenev’s “Singers”), Russian composers did not necessarily (and generally did not) focus on this mood in their compositions, tending to focus instead on exotic coloration.