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Review Of "Soviet Heroic Poetry In Context: Folklore Or Fakelore" By M. Ziolkowski

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Ziolkowski, Margaret. *Soviet Heroic Poetry in Context: Folklore or Fakelore*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013. Illustrations. Notes. Selected Bibliography. Index. xi + 224 pp. \$80.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-1611494563.

The *noviny*—Russian Soviet epic poems composed in traditional *bylina* style but devoted to the exploits of more recent heroes such as Lenin, Stalin or Chapaev—are familiar to every serious student of modern Russian folklore, yet most of us know very little about them. Margaret Ziolkowski’s *Soviet Heroic Poetry in Context* makes its main question clear with its subtitle: are these works folklore or fakelore (borrowing Richard M. Dorson’s term, which shows that Western democracies have had as much manufactured “folk” material as any socialist country)? The response to the question, in sum, is that the *noviny* are both, and that their context is not at all simple, or merely limited to the Soviet Union in the second quarter of the 20th century. No one can judge the *noviny* either as aesthetic objects or as cultural phenomena without knowing that context.

Ziolkowski sets up the question of the collector or editor’s role in the establishment of national folklore canons in a chapter focusing on James Macpherson (Ossian), the Grimm brothers, Vuk Karadžić, and Elias Lönnrot (the Kalevala) and their roles in establishing national schools of folklore collection and accepted practices of folklore collection. The context immediately emerges as complex, following debates over the authenticity of works like Macpherson’s Ossian and their impact in Europe (through translations and shifting literary fashion from Neoclassicism to Sentimentalism and then Romanticism, and in new projects of collection elsewhere). Ziolkowski notes that accusations of fraud in Macpherson often reflect political tensions between England and Scotland. Despite subsequent scholarship pointing out the editorial tendencies of Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm, their collected tales still enjoy great authority as a model of authenticity, through their successful “creation of the myth of an unmediated illiterate peasantry serving as a direct source for the Grimms’ collection” (p. 13). Karadžić edited the work he collected as well and was criticized for appropriating materials from singers who were not Serbs. Elias Lönnrot’s work with the Kalevala provoked Swedish and Russian objections, as well as comparisons to Macpherson. “The very existence and continued celebration of Kalevala Day bear witness to the powerful link between politics and folklore” (p. 30).

The second chapter discusses oral composition and the research of Milman Parry and Albert Lord, as well as Russian folklorists and other folklorists and their theories of the oral compositional process. Ziolkowski brings in translation of classical epic poems and evidence of folklorists’ growing distrust of the pernicious influence of literacy on oral performers. Here too even a reader who knows the major works in folklore studies will begin to see new angles.

Chapter 3 looks in more detail into the work of Rybnikov, Hilferding, and other pre-Soviet collectors. Ziolkowski points out interesting and indicative details in their collections of epic songs, and she draws out the implications for their attitudes toward (and at times intervention in) the material. The fourth chapter addresses the making of the *noviny* by both singers and their literate assistants or directors. Many of the folklorists she cites here are important in other

areas of twentieth-century folklore studies as well, underlining that the *noviny* were not a peripheral phenomenon.

Chapter 5 examines the interwoven poetics and politics in this genre, reaching back again to note that educated Russians “were likely to focus on heroic incidents and personages from the *byliny* rather than vulgar examples of drunken carousing, womanizing, and other unseemly behavior. The *bylina* topics that found visual artistic expression, especially in painting, reflect this development.” By the early twentieth century, *bylina* plots and episodes were tending to accrue to Ilya Muromets (p. 126). Ziolkowski lists typical *bylina* stylistic traits and ways the *bylina* was “recycled.” The “ghost-writing” of *noviny* by professional or amateur folklorists was not unique to folk production, but analogous to the practice of assigning literate and often literary partners to non-elite writers in the early Soviet years (for example, in aviator Valerii Tchkalov’s recollections of meeting with Stalin). The Zhdanov period impacted the fate of the *noviny*, as did Fadeev’s 1949 “unmasking” of Aleksandr Veselovsky (who had died in 1906!). Ziolkowski’s dry tone adds a bracing irony to some summations, as for example, “Ryabinin-Andreev also quickly began to produce *noviny* devoted to the immensely popular theme of Stalin’s brilliance” (p. 144).

In the sixth and seventh chapters, the reader can trace the ways Soviet folklorists and others continued to debate the status and significance of the *noviny*—both in the context of world folklore scholarship and in their relationship to Stalin, whose fall from grace meant that many lines could never again be cited as a good example of anything. Lenin, on the other hand, remained acceptable throughout the Soviet period, as “politics trumps aesthetics” (p. 180). Ziolkowski gives clear and succinct summaries of the various positions in the long debate over the *noviny*—one which in fact has never been satisfactorily resolved. Many major figures in these debates had precious little to do with folklore, perhaps bouncing off Maxim Gorky’s gesture toward folklore as a vital source for literature in the formation of Socialist Realism.

In the Soviet Union, especially under Stalin, any cultural realm could turn out to have high stakes, and folklore was no exception. In the late 1990s, Irina Razumova (one scholar Ziolkowski cites) described in a conversation her students of contemporary folklore and ethnography, who were gathering rumors at bus stops and doing other innovative projects. Razumova paused to comment that in the Soviet period the secret police would have taken away the students’ notebooks – as well as the folklorists themselves. Another story described notebooks in an archive, written in the 1920s by undergraduate students on collecting expeditions to the same northern regions of Russia where *byliny* were first discovered. The students noted that certain villages were inhabited by “сплошные кулаки” [‘nothing but kulaks,’ i.e. wealthy peasants] – and those bits were underlined in red by another hand; the villages in question no longer exist. Folklore was implicated in Soviet politics from a variety of directions. One cannot wonder that some folklorists turned to *noviny* as a genre with sufficient heroic pretensions for lauding the new Soviet leaders (“history as ritual,” to borrow a phrase from Katerina Clark’s work on the Socialist Realist novel), while others picked up examples that had been collected (or generated) and included them in their

collections and studies of oral poetry. Of course folklorists could use a genre like this: folk cultural production had to be as pro-Soviet as any other, and *noviny* let folklorists and ethnographers continue their work without the risks of working with more lively and subversive genres of oral lore (like Soviet political jokes).

As an example of a *novina* often cited by Soviet scholars as good in both aesthetic and folkloric terms, Ziolkowski looks closely at “All Stone Moscow Wept” by Marfa Kriukova (178 ff), treating Lenin’s death. It was Kriukova who coined the term *novina*, by analogy with *starina*. Here and throughout the book, Ziolkowski gives very adequate prose translations whenever she cites original sources. Her clear and often witty writing provides frequent quotable formulations of every aspect of folklore and cultural politics surrounding the epic songs.

The book’s cover image is quite beautiful: as I was reading it at a conference, the person next to me asked to have a look, and as she did the person next to her wanted a look as well. A few pages (138 ff) of portraits of the best-known singers enhance the presentation. Given the many citations in Russian and other foreign items, the book is impressively well proofread, a credit to high standards at the University of Delaware Press.

Soviet epic folklore may seem a narrow topic, one that few even among specialists have read, but the context gives this book its informative richness and opens the way to see these texts in a new light. *Soviet Heroic Poetry in Context* probably will not lead to a renaissance in studies of the *noviny*, but it is a very informative and pleasurable study of a thorny and fascinating topic.

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