

Архипова, Александра, и Анна Кирзюк. *Опасные советские вещи: Городские легенды и страхи в СССР*. [Arkhipova, Aleksandra and Anna Kirziuk. *Dangerous Soviet Things: Urban Legends and Fears in the USSR*]. Москва: Новое литературное обозрение, 2020. (Серия «Культура Повседневности» 536 pp. Cloth. \$24.00. ISBN 978-5-4448-1174-0.

The twenty-first century is shaping up to be a great time to be a thing. Object-oriented ontology continues to find adherents. Things can be ascribed agency. And, thanks to built-in sensors, smart homes, and wearable technology, things even have their own Internet.

Nevertheless, things continue to circulate both as objects and as the stories we tell about them. Where would material culture be without its immaterial side? Though Aleksandra Arkhipova and Anna Kriziuk's wonderful new book is entitled *Dangerous Soviet Things*, its subtitle makes clear that the things themselves are a pretext: "Urban Legends and Fears in the USSR."

Russian urban folklore is no stranger to fear, as the popularity of brutal children's rhymes called "*strashilki*" might suggest. But the *strashilka* tames its morbid subject matter through humor, a Russian counterpart to such contemporaries as the unrhymed American "Mommy, Mommy" joke ("Mommy, Mommy, I'm tired of walking around in circles!" "Shut up, or I'll nail your other foot to the floor) or dead baby jokes that Alan Dundes wrote about back in 1979. The stories that Arkhipova and Kirziuk study, by contrast, are told in earnest, conjuring up a plethora of threats that lie in wait for unsuspecting Soviet citizens.

The authors provide a quick but thorough survey of the existing scholarship on urban legends, doing a service for readers who may be encountering the topic for the first time. After laying out the differences between the psychoanalytically inflected "interpretive" approach and the more recent moves toward memetic analysis, Arkhipova and Kirziuk split the difference, promising both interpretation of content and an informed treatment of the "viral" spread of urban legends throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet space. The result is both compelling and comprehensive.

Arkhipova and Kirziuk are not merely applying existing theoretical models to local (Russian) material; the book's stakes are much higher. Questions of danger, enemies, and secret threats are already integral to our understanding of the Soviet century. The very fact that one of the formative historical events in the Soviet Union is called the "Great Terror" reminds us just how justified fear could be, while the Stalinist emphasis on internal enemies such as "wreckers" wove paranoia into the fabric of everyday life. Thus, the relationship between urban legends and official Soviet culture turns out to be quite complicated, changing over the course of the decades that the authors examine.

To paraphrase the old slogan, the Stalinist Terror was born to turn urban legends into life. Or rather, to propagate false tales of internal enemies that would, in turn, spread from state propaganda to folk culture. Along the way, this becomes less about witch hunts and more about a generalized hermeneutics of suspicion. If the internal enemy could pass for a friend, he could also exert an unseen

influence on the otherwise politically reliable Soviet symbolic system: “It was assumed that this enemy, deprived of the opportunity to act in the open, devoted himself to what we call ‘semiotic sabotage’ [*semioticheskoe vreditel'stvo*], that is, he infects Soviet things with signs of his presence” (Chapter 2). Thus, swastikas were said to be found in the buildings constructed by German prisoners of war, and pictures of Mao hidden within the fabric of Chinese carpets.

As these examples suggest, a significant portion of Soviet urban legends unveiled the malign influence of the foreign within the domestic. As the country opened up, with the encounter between decent Soviet citizens and actual foreigners growing more statistically likely, stories proliferated about the danger they brought with them. If, under Stalin, the threat was explicitly ideological and existential, by the Brezhnev years, the real problem was the enticing glamour of consumerism that foreigners brought with them. Urban legends dramatized the conflict between official Soviet values and the irresistible lure of the shiny new objects brought over the border.

American folklore is full of stories about rats in fast food, and suspicious Chinese meals. But such tales are usually in the services of a racist hierarchy: the food is dangerous because it is made by subhuman Others. The Americans who tempt Soviet children with lethal bubble gum are different, presumably motivated by sheer malice. And if the fancy toys and delicious treats brought by foreigners turn out to be deadly, the reigning anti-consumerist ideology is implicitly justified. In these cases, it is not enough that the grapes be sour; they must be toxic.

Arkhipova and Kirziuk are at great pains to convince their readers that Soviet urban legends arose from “above” and from “below,” in this, they are implicitly aligning themselves with the more nuanced approach to ideology and Soviet civilization that has slowly gained the upper hand in Western scholarly accounts. Some of the urban legends discussed in the book would seem to support the official line. Others subvert it, and still others manage to do both at the same time. In analyzing a wealth of thoroughly fascinating material, the authors develop their interpretive frameworks without letting them overwhelm the stories themselves. Come to this book for the hidden pictures of Trotsky and rumors of poisoned matzoh, but stay for Arkhipova and Kirziuk’s patient insight.

Eliot Borenstein  
New York University  
New York City, NY, USA  
eb7@nyu.edu