

Astapova, Anastasiya. *Humor and Rumor in the Post-Soviet Authoritarian State* (Studies in Folklore and Ethnology: Traditions, Practices, and Identities). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021. Index. xii+171 pp. \$95.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-7936-2429-1.

Although the dramatic intensification of political repression in Belarus since the fraudulent August 2020 presidential election makes this a particularly timely book, this publication is in fact the product of seven years of fieldwork. Folklorist and humor scholar Anastasiya Astapova collected hundreds of jokes, rumors, and other interview data, both in her native Belarus and among the Belarusian diaspora in several countries from 2011 to 2018. The resulting monograph provides a compelling account of what the author calls (after the political anthropologist James C. Scott) the “hidden or backstage transcript” of contemporary life and popular discourse in a country that has widely been considered the most unreconstructed “Soviet” of all the post-Soviet states for more than a quarter of a century. In this regard, *Humor and Rumor in the Post-Soviet Authoritarian State* is a significant new contribution to the “everyday turn” in the scholarly study of the former Second World, represented by the work of Timothy Johnston, Sheila Fitzpatrick, Jochen Hellbeck, and many others. The book also breaks new ground in the fields of contemporary folklore studies and interdisciplinary humor research, and in particular the wide-ranging tradition of joke studies, represented in the Slavic and East European sphere by authors such as Alexandra Arkhipova, David Brandenberger, Jonathan Waterlow, and Elliott Oring.

Astapova begins with a useful preface that briefly describes the situation in Belarus since August 2020 and predicts the lasting relevance of her work despite the uncertainty of future developments: “[w]hat has been documented in this book will remain crucial, whether for the study of Belarus or any other country with a history of nondemocratic rule” (vii). This nod to the exportability of her tightly focused study of popular political expression in one small nation is elaborated on in the subsequent chapters, both with direct comparisons between Belarusian texts and similar material from other countries (including the USSR and several of the independent nations that emerged from it in 1991) and with frequent yet judicious deployment of more general theoretical sources from various disciplines, including history, discourse analysis, anthropology, and such emerging sub-disciplines as surveillance studies.

The thoroughly sourced introduction includes a careful, informed discussion of Astapova’s terminological choices, including her rationale for using the phrase “authoritarian state” rather than “dictatorship,” a label that has been widely applied to Belarus for over a decade (after Condoleezza Rice first popularized the term “last dictatorship in Europe” in reference to President Alexander Lukashenko’s increasingly authoritarian regime). This chapter also contains a helpful elaboration of the term “political folklore,” with an impeccably sourced and detailed taxonomy of scholars’ various approaches to this category of popular cultural production. The thoroughness and generosity to the reader shown in this

introductory chapter is maintained throughout the book. In her chapter on surveillance rumors, for example, Astapova includes a nuanced primer on the subtle differences between the genres of rumor, legend, “contemporary legend,” and conspiracy theory. These theoretical and methodological exercises are all firmly grounded in the specific examples collected by the author, and convincingly integrated into her overarching argument about the contemporary functions of humor in non-democratic societies.

The empirical chapters are organized thematically according to the topics of the texts analyzed therein: surveillance rumors; political jokes; metajokes; Lukashenko’s image; the Potemkin-village-style efforts to please the President and other political elites on their official visits; and the increasingly farcical elections that have been conducted every four or five years in Belarus since 1994. Astapova acknowledges that all these topics are more or less directly about Lukashenko himself, but she does a good job of teasing out the often-subtle distinctions between jokes and rumors about, for instance, the President’s official biography and popular reactions to what she calls the “vernacular panopticon” of living in a police state. The author is adept at demonstrating links between the various themes of the jokes and rumors that are not immediately obvious. For example, in her discussion of the Belarusian KGB and its ubiquitous yet vaguely defined monitoring of nearly all aspects of life in the country, she cites the following joke, which is ostensibly about bureaucratic inefficiency, but at the same time alludes to the paranoid meticulousness that characterizes the country’s special services in the popular imagination:

“When did the Second World War start?”

“On September 1, 1939.”

“And when did the Great Patriotic War [...] start?”

“On June 22, 1941.”

“What were [the] Germans doing in between?”

“Clearing [...] Belarusian customs.” (30)

Astapova’s translations of the hundreds of texts she analyzes are clear and readable. It is understandable that the Russian and Belarusian originals are not given for most of the jokes and rumors cited, due to space concerns, and the book’s potential appeal to area-studies specialists will not be diminished by the absence. In the instances that she does provide the original, it is because the text’s meaning or humor relies on phonetic or other untranslatable linguistic features.

One might take issue with Astapova’s ready acceptance of Scott’s claim that “the stricter the regime is, the richer political folklore becomes” (9). The history of the political *anekdot* in the Soviet Union, where the genre’s heyday coincided not with the Stalin era but with the comparatively “vegetarian” Thaw and Stagnation periods that followed, belies this argument. This very minor quibble aside, Astapova’s book will certainly be of interest to students, scholars, and other

readers interested in what she terms the “current vernacular reactions” of citizens in Belarus and other non-democratic societies to the political contexts in which they live.

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