

REVIEWS

Keçenç, Toms, Simon J. Bronner, Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, eds. *Folklore and Ethnology in the Soviet Western Borderlands: Socialist in Form, Nationalist in Content* (Studies in Folklore and Ethnology: Traditions, Practices, and Identities). London: Lexington Books, 2024. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 302 pp. \$110 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-66690-653-0.

The notions of nation, national identity, and shared identity in the post-Soviet sphere have come even more to the fore with the events of the last ten years and the Russian Federation continuing to stake its claims on the territory of Ukraine. This volume is yet another important piece to understanding the mechanisms behind the framing of nation and national identity. The scholars that have contributed to *Folklore and Ethnology in the Soviet Western Borderlands* advance the understanding of the development of folkloristics and ethnography in the “Western Borderlands,” meaning the territories on the Western border of the former Soviet Union, through a study of their historiography. The essays in this volume tell the story of how national and ethnic identities were framed in the context of the Stalin-era cultural policy of “socialist in form, national in content” and its legacy.

Fourteen scholars across twelve chapters delve into various aspects of the development of approaches to ethnology and folklore in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Moldova, Ukraine, East Germany, and Hungary. The book is divided into four sections, the first dealing with the socialist period and the relationship between socialism and nationalism in Soviet Russia. The second part looks at the role of minorities in the construction of socialist national policies. In part three, the essays look at the implementation of socialist ideas of folk culture through the management of artistic expression and the roles of different agencies in this process. Lastly, the final section looks at the relationship between nationalization and Sovietization, modernization and colonial power.

Keçenç’s first chapter sets the stakes for the subsequent case studies. He defines folklore as “a sociocultural semiotic system” and analyzes the “cultural logic of *folk* in the era between World War II and the demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics” (33). In examining the language of folklore, we can understand the mechanisms behind various social constructs underpinning the building of the Soviet Union and of communism. Both his chapter and the book as a whole aim toward a “comparative dialogue” (2) rather than discussions of uniqueness. That said, most of the subsequent essays are written along national lines: traditional songs in Estonia, Latvian folk ornament, and folk art in Poland. Perhaps it is for the reader to draw the comparisons, or that could even have been the task for the afterword. Nonetheless, each of the individual essays contributed a fascinating exploration of particular concerns from the researchers’ varying areas of expertise. It was also refreshing to see a refined consideration of the region, not focusing solely on Soviet nations but also on socialist neighbors from East Germany, Poland, and Hungary.

While this book is clearly about the past, it is also about the present, which Bronner makes clear in his afterword. He notes that the Russo-Ukrainian War was “indeed related to folklore in the region and its study and presentation there” (267). He further states:

The war was, in fact, intertwined with the legacy of folkloristic education in the Soviet period and the frequent claims of regional/ethnic groups to the same land, the colonialist implications of a mythological Russian “motherland,” and independence movements of breakaway republics inspired by divergent ideologies of cultural nationalism, religious theocracy and western democracy.

The preceding essays in this volume in fact laid out precisely this idea. But knowing this, in the academic sense, and understanding this, in the “real world” are two very different things, and through no fault of its own the influence of this book is unlikely to extend to policy makers.

In an age when we can read headlines on a daily basis questioning the utility and future of the humanities alongside those detailing ongoing global strife involving conflict along national and ethnic lines, it is always surprising that those who lament the latter fail to consider what the former can offer. Those of us in these fields know that there is a lot that culture, identity building, and knowledge generation can tell us about the present conflicts we are witnessing in the Middle East, Ukraine, and Russia, and elsewhere, and that is what makes this volume so important. It outlines how these concepts that are often considered or claimed to be intrinsic were in fact carefully constructed, all with the aim of creating a Soviet Union out of discrete nations and peoples from scratch. But much more work needs to be done to bridge the gap between academics and its real-world applications, and perhaps that would be a topic for a future study.

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