

**In the Field with Russian Scholars: Observations by an American Researcher**  
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Those who do fieldwork are always dependent upon the goodwill of many people, but in the former Soviet Union there was an additional level of dependency. Often foreign researchers relied upon the kindness and the company of native scholars to do fieldwork outside of major cities. This was partly due to the fact that foreigners needed to obtain permission to travel. Legally one could not simply board a train and get off where the terrain looked promising. But Russian scholars could help one obtain permission to accompany them on an expedition.

Now things are different in Russia. One can literally just get off the train where things look interesting. But this approach has several disadvantages, perhaps foremost among them being the distrust of villagers, about which Russian scholars warn foreigners.(1) In some areas people are notoriously distrustful even of unknown Russian visitors, and things are getting worse as crime rates rise in villages and villagers become more afraid. Russian scholars in the North, the Urals, and Siberia talk of long fieldwork days when they were never invited beyond the threshold of a house; others report that they are allowed access to certain information only upon repeated visits, after spending hours helping *babushkas* hoe their gardens.(2) For foreigners who do not have the opportunity to return twice yearly to a favorite village to build trust with villagers, an introduction by a well-known and well-loved scholar helps overcome tremendous barriers.

I was able to watch this principle at work this past spring, when I was invited by villagers in Kaluzhskaia *oblast'* to videotape a funeral repast on the fortieth day after the death of a sixty-year old man. I was a stranger to these people, so I was shocked that they agreed to be filmed by me. When I entered the room where the repast was to take place and saw the widow lamenting, I decided not to film. It was too private a moment. But the local woman who had brought me there motioned to my camera bag. "Take it out!," she whispered. I thought I heard wrong, so I did not move. But she repeated the gesture, more forcefully, and I did take it out. What I filmed for the next few moments reflected my sense that I was intruding: I kept the camera moving over the dishes of prepared food and the photograph of the deceased on the mantel, fearing to expose the grief of the widow by filming her face. Later on, as I made eye contact with the participants in the ritual, I relaxed. I realized that most of them completely accepted my presence. When the repast was over, several people thanked me for filming. They said they were grateful for my interest in their lives and

traditions.

Their acceptance of me was not because of anything I did to earn it, but entirely due to the continuing hard work of Elena and Sergei Minyonok, folklorists at the Institute of World Literature, Moscow, whom I accompanied on this trip. Elena has visited this village more than six times since 1986 and the villagers treat her almost like family. The local women asked for details about Elena's newborn daughter, and even gave her advice on how to breast-feed her. In a long-established Russian tradition of city intellectuals trying to give social aid to villagers, Elena regularly counsels her informants on such non-folkloric matters as how to get medical care in Moscow for their health problems. She also has brought needed cash to a few of the villagers by arranging orders for hand-knitted and crocheted goods, and by renting local houses, purchasing local food, and employing local women as cooks for visitors, who have included foreign volunteers and both foreign and Russian TV crews.

The Minyonoks regularly work with foreign volunteers through Earthwatch Institute as a means of supporting their research. Elena reports that it is not always simple to take foreigners to villages. She sees some mistrust and resentment there (and I, too, saw evidence that my presence was not universally accepted in the some of the villages I visited); but the majority of the villagers appreciate these visits, remember the foreign volunteers, and ask about them even years later. However, the volunteers can be difficult to work with for another reason: they are unskilled and most do not speak Russian. The Minyonoks spend additional energy translating and instructing when they bring volunteers along.

The Minyonoks, as many of the Russian scholars I spoke with, would relish the chance to work with American scholars whose work dovetails with their own. During fall, winter, and spring 1998-99, as I traveled through Russia meeting folklorists and musicologists active in the folklore revival movement (about which I am writing a book), a common theme emerged: most have no funds to do research. Because of the current economic situation in Russia, many institutions, which formerly had budgets large enough to support several expeditions a year, now can afford very few or none. Scholars are looking for grant money or other money with which to pay for their travel and equipment expenses. Their salaries are minuscule and are not paid regularly, so few can travel on their own money. But American researchers who are interested in joining up with these scholars can help by obtaining grants to pay for train fare, hotels and other incidentals, and even equipment. On a very small scale, I "funded" two expeditions with scholars at the Moscow Conservatory Laboratory of Folk Music this past fall. The expenses for two people, including train tickets to areas in South

Russia, local hotel rooms or homestays, and meals for one week did not exceed \$300. Additionally, in one situation I paid for a village House of Culture to lend us their van and driver for the cost of gas alone (total was less than \$15 for 3 days of local driving). In each case, the expedition was organized using the musicologist's contacts in the area (usually an official at a Culture Department in a provincial city). After the musicologist had asked that contact to help me, I would arrange the details of the trip by phone from Moscow. For their help in arranging and accompanying me on these trips, I also paid the scholars a modest honorarium.

In this type of arrangement, American researchers can benefit from the musicologist's contacts and expertise, and the musicologist is able to travel to areas s/he might not otherwise have the chance to visit. However, the accommodation of two scholars' different interests can be difficult. Since research styles tend to differ widely among researchers with different training, it is wise to communicate your needs as fully as you can in order to avoid disappointment.

To give an idea of the possible differences in research styles, I will recount some experiences from this past fall. For one expedition, I did not arrange the details of the trip beforehand, but left these up to the musicologist, Natalia Giliarova (chair of the Theory Division of the Moscow Conservatory), and her local contact, the principal of a grammar school in Volgograd *oblast'*. During the expedition we visited six villages, saw classes and presentations at a grammar school, high school and college with folklore programs, attended a village wedding and a small-town festival, and toured two museums and a World War II monument. I was grateful for the exposure to this rich and varied material, but found this pace difficult for the type of work I was trying to do (largely interviews with village singers and culture administrators). Visiting six villages in three days meant going to two per day, for two- to three- hour visits each. It was explained to me that this way, we would make full use of the transport available to us. Giliarova agreed that the pace was a little fast, but says she works this way normally and finds it adequate to get a sense of the status of traditional culture in a village. She then re-visits villages which interest her, and stays longer (1-2 days) the next time. Since I will probably not have the opportunity to re-visit those villages, I would rather have spent more time there on the first visit. In arranging trips with scholars, I would make sure to specify the minimum length of time I needed in each village or institution.

In the trips I took with music scholars, the fact that my goals differed from theirs sometimes led to difficulties conducting interviews or sessions with singing groups. The general aim of these musicologists (the ones I worked with had been trained at the Moscow Conservatory, but their approach was similar to that of musicologists I had observed elsewhere) is to produce good archival

recordings of songs or music, from which a transcription (into musical notation) can be readily made. In their recordings, they want to present the features of the local musical style in the most accessible (audible) way possible. Furthermore, many of them are interested exclusively in the oldest stylistic features that exist. Thus, it is not uncommon for a Russian musicologist to coach singers on stylistic features (e.g. in one case, a musicologist suggested that the upper voice, *podgolosok*, end on the same note as the other voices, instead of an octave above them). They also remind them of the "correct" text (i.e., the fullest one or the one that was recorded earlier), suggest a different starting pitch, or ask specific members of the group to change parts or be silent during specific songs. One scholar talked to me about the necessity to "*ubirat' griaz'*" [remove the dirt] from recordings as they are made in the field (not later). He explained that this meant the musicologist had to induce singers who sing "out of tune" to be silent, and sometimes to reduce an unwieldy group of singers to three or four well-chosen individuals. All of the musicologists I worked with tended to run fieldwork sessions like a film or theater director, giving directions such as "Stop! Do it over from the beginning!"

This approach had the advantage of keeping a session orderly: there was no question about who was leading, the conversation did not get out of hand, and the recordings were clear and served a clear purpose. Furthermore, this approach made economical use of limited time. Curious about how the villagers perceived this approach, I asked a group of informants whether they liked being coached in this manner, and they answered with a clear "yes." They said they thought that the musicologist's comments helped them sound better and that she knew how their music should sound. They respected her opinion and trusted that she was bringing them closer to the "original" style of their village. That this was a goal they themselves strove for could clearly be seen during my stay among them: these villagers corrected a song text themselves by going to an older woman who was reputed to know many songs, and checking their text with her (it turned out they had combined three separate songs). They later insisted on singing the songs "properly" for our recording.

However, some of these villagers' goals and values differed from those of the musicologist. When this same group of villagers offered to sing bawdy *chastushkas* during a recording/interview session held over dinner, the musicologist tried briefly to stop them. She was not successful: the group's (and my own) wishes prevailed. Her actions show clearly how some musicologists choose their material based upon their own ideas (not their informants' ideas) of what is valuable and what is not. When asked later on why she did not want these *chastushkas* recorded, the musicologist was not able to specify a reason; she said she just felt it was wrong.<sup>(3)</sup> In fact, Soviet-era training forbid the collection of various categories of material, including erotic material. The field of

erotic folklore has become accessible to scholars only during post-Soviet years.(4)

That erotic folklore is one of Elena Minyonok's specialties reflects her somewhat unorthodox, or at least post-Soviet, style and interests. Although trained as a folklorist, Elena also works on singing. She is interested in the life of the villagers who sing, and in the ways that their geographical, social and family groupings affect their singing (in terms of repertoire and stylistic features). She collects information not only about local folklore, traditional life ("byt'" and material culture) and songs, but also the villagers' histories (for example, where they were born, their marital history, how collectivization and World War II affected them, and their relation to the changes currently taking place in society). This information helps her compose a complete picture of folklore transmission. Instead of being exclusively interested in the oldest songs, Elena is interested in what repertoire people choose to sing and why. Her chosen method involves interviewing members of the group singly or in pairs, allowing them to direct some of the flow of the singing and talking that goes on. She is interested in analyzing their musical style of the region, but does not typically ask for correction of pitch, texts, and stylistic features. Clearly, she does not believe in the existence of a single "original" style, quality, or text that must be replicated in field recordings.

A syncretic, holistic approach to folklore such as this is gaining popularity in Russia. I saw attention to all aspects of traditional culture, including material culture and past and modern-day life -- and the interrelation of these aspects -- not just among professional folklorists (and, it must be noted, some musicologists as well), but also in many of the leading amateur folk ensembles and schools in the country. For example, a folk performing and research group based at Perm University collects all genres of folk verbal culture in villages of Perm *oblast'* (including songs, fairy tales, and fantastic tales or *bylichkas*) and learns to sing and tell these in dialect. Since their goal is not only to perform, but also to immerse themselves in local culture, they learn stories and songs, including those that are not suited to the stage because this material deepens their own knowledge of tradition (pieces in this category include, for example, funeral and wedding laments, and longer stories). Furthermore, tradition itself is broadly defined by this group: they sing not only ritual and calendary songs, but also "late" (late nineteenth or early twentieth century) romances, since they believe it is important to learn and honor whatever is in the repertoire of their village informants. The members of the ensemble (many of whom are undergraduate students of history and ethnography) also collect information about how to weave and embroider, and the place that these practices traditionally occupied in daily life. Both men and women members make traditional costumes from scratch (that is, from raw materials), and they reported that museum curators have tried to purchase their costumes for museum collections,

because they took the costumes for folk "originals."

Amateur groups such as these, which receive extremely little if any institutional support, are generally also open to the possibility of doing joint fieldwork with visiting scholars from abroad. It has been my experience that working with such groups in fieldwork situations can be easier than working with professional musicologists, since these amateur ethnologists have not received extensive training as to how to conduct field sessions, and are generally not collecting with any goal in mind other than to increase their own knowledge about local traditions. Because they are located relatively close to their informants and have the ability to see them more often, they may be more willing to let the foreign scholar lead the sessions. Furthermore, trips with amateur ensembles from the provincial city to fieldwork sites may include adventures such as side-trips to visit grandma.

I hope this short account will stimulate dialogue in this publication on folklore research styles. Additionally, I would be glad to correspond with other scholars interested in this subject, and to answer questions related to what I have written here. Contact me at [lolson@colorado.edu](mailto:lolson@colorado.edu).

#### Notes

1. In 1990, after having successfully completed 8 months of fieldwork in villages in Bosnia and Bulgaria where I knew no one, and was accompanied only by two American colleagues, I was told by Russian researchers that I could not do the same in Russia. "*Eto ne balkan*," they said. I have not put this information to the test by trying visits to villages where I knew no one. I suspect that the notion of Russian villagers' lack of receptiveness to strangers and foreigners is somewhat exaggerated, but have no hard facts to counter it. It would be interesting to hear from those who have tried it.

2. Information based upon interviews with folklorists, musicologists, and ethnographers in St. Petersburg, Perm, and Novosibirsk, during December 1998 and May, 1999.

3. This musicologist did not think it improper to record erotic motifs in ritual songs, and in fact was herself collecting parodies of wedding laments, some of which were erotic. She also was not averse to the collection of non-erotic *chastushkas*. Her aversion to erotic *chastushkas* may be based upon an assumption that these were a "lower" form of *chastushka*, a kind of street folklore that belongs in the street, not in archives.

4. Information from interviews with Moscow folklorists and musicologists, November, 1998 and May, 1999.