

Emily D. Johnson. How St. Petersburg Learned to Study Itself. The Russian Idea of *Kraevedenie*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006. Notes. Bibliography. Index. ix+305. \$55 (cloth). ISBN 0-271-02872-6.

Johnson's How St. Petersburg Learned to Study Itself. The Russian Idea of *Kraevedenie* would at first glance seem to be the latest in a long line of books on St. Petersburg. However, while this book is a cultural history, it differs significantly from other histories such as Lincoln's Sunlight at Midnight: St. Petersburg and the Rise of Modern Russia (2001), Clark's Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution (1995), and Salisbury's 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad (1970). Rather than focus on the city itself and the historical events surrounding it, Johnson studies the development of two issues of no little interest to those who study folk conceptions of society and nation. Not surprisingly, the first of these is the development of the Petersburg myth within the framework of guidebooks on the city. Second, and what is unique about this volume, is how this issue serves as the backdrop for the development of a discipline unknown in the western world, *kraevedenie* or 'local studies.' The term is generally defined as: "the study of the natural environment, population, economy, history, or culture of some part of a country, such as an administrative or natural region, or a place of settlement" (3). Specialists in this field "investigate and describe both natural and man-made landscapes, study the ways in which human society and environment affect each other, and decipher the semiotics of space. They deconstruct local myths, analyze the conventions governing the depiction of specific regions and towns in works of art and literature, and dissect both outsider and insider perception of local population groups" (3). In sum, while there exists a strong environmental science component of the discipline, they often rely on the same material that folklorists study to gain an understanding of an ethos. In fact, folklore study formed an integral part of the field itself. As Johnson notes, once the Central Bureau of *kraevedenie* was established in 1921, it served as an umbrella organization both for teachers and for researchers who wanted to "collect information on Russia's national resources and climate, study regional folklore or identify and preserve local historical monuments" (158).

The city of St. Petersburg itself, of course, has long history as the topic of study, not only in non-fiction, but also in literature. From the earliest days of the city, when Pushkin wrote his *Bronze Horseman* to

Brodsky's poems on his native city, it has captured the attention of foe and friend alike. As Johnson points out, "opposition to the Petrine reforms in the early eighteenth century gave rise to a host of anecdotes, prophecies, and curses that labeled Peter I the Antichrist and his new capital an unholy seat" (30). At the same time, Johnson argues, many chose to "represent its creation as a supremely important stage in the fulfillment of Russia's divinely foreordained and much heralded historic destiny" (19). Johnson takes as her starting point guidebooks about Petersburg, which have a heralded tradition in Russia and which made a significant comeback in the city itself during the *perestroika* years. These books form the basis of this study.

Like Clark before her, Johnson's interest lies in the various socio-cultural trends that contribute to historical events, in this case the development of the "identity discipline" of *kraevedenie*. According to Johnson, an identity discipline is "a field dominated by scholars who strongly identify with the subject of their scholarship, perceiving it as 'self' rather than 'other.' In such areas of specialization, the distinction between researcher and researched remains blurred at best" (5). Similar disciplines in the western tradition include gender studies, African American studies, and queer studies. Within the (Soviet) Russian context, *kraevedenie* "has always been closely associated with the historical and ecological preservation movements, various forms of local boosterism, and, to a real extent, anticentrist sentiment."

The strength of this work for a folklorist is the author's examination of the wide variety of social and cultural influences that played a role in the development of *kraevedenie* and indeed in the development of folk conceptions about Petersburg, about Russia and indeed about the field itself more broadly. In her analysis of the most significant authors of guidebooks about St. Petersburg, including Grevs, Antsiferov, Gollerbakh and Iatsevich, Johnson touches on the preservation movement as initiated by the World of Art movement, literary scholarship, oral lore, political trends from the post-revolutionary period through the fall of the Soviet Union, and pedagogical theory (namely the excursionist movement of the 1920s). The interaction of political material and folk understanding of society is particularly enlightening. To take just one example, she studies (165) how specialists in Petersburg itself, the locus of this field, suffered from purges during the Stalin years because they "sometimes showed a disconcerting propensity for both independent thought and coordinated action. In a period of growing centralization, the *kraevedy* often spoke out in favor of diversity and

modest regional independence” (165). However, in the post-Stalin era the field was viewed as “harmless or perhaps even positive way for Soviet citizens to spend their leisure time” (177). As a result of this view, *kraevedenie* began to reemerge as a discipline for scholars who were more liberal in their views; it provided protection from rigid disciplinary and political control and allowed for an extent of creativity and flexibility not seen in traditional humanities disciplines. The most revealing and indeed important contribution to those in folklore studies are the chapters dealing with development of the discipline at the turn of the century and after the revolution. The final chapter on literary *kraevedenie* seemed to drag and was less focused than the author’s earlier analysis. But this is a minor quibble about a book that makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of how folk conceptions of state and identity interact with “high” culture in the emergence of a discipline.

At its core this book is roughly equivalent to Bronner’s Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture (1998), which traces the development of folklore as a scholarly discipline in the United States. Johnson examines how the field of *kraevedenie*, unknown in the west, emerged within the (Soviet) Russian context and how it played upon and reacted to various social forces in the process. The author concludes that:

Disciplines, in other words, are best understood as by-products of social exchange, of interaction between communities of scholars, public and private agencies, institutions, and interest groups. The boundaries which contain them arise gradually as the result of a myriad of small acts...disciplinary constructs will often, particularly in the early stages of their development, resemble ungainly conglomerates. Most, like *kraevedenie*, will combine within themselves elements that might reasonably be judged heterogeneous, groups of research, theories, and work of scholarship that proceed from different intellectual traditions and are in significant respects dissimilar. (216)

This book will be of interest to those in a variety of fields: folklore, cultural history, literature, anthropology and pedagogy and is a welcome addition to the canon of works of cultural history centered on St. Petersburg.

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