

# **Notes from the workshop on field work in the former USSR, AATSEEL Conference, 1997**

(These informal notes, provided thanks to Natalie Kononenko, outline the issues discussed at the workshop in Toronto in December.)

Practical considerations come at 2 levels:

- 1) It is different
- 2) What you need may not exist

Equipment you are likely to need for fieldwork:

- > voltage plugs, phone jack
- > tapes -- expense may determine whether you buy there or here
- > film, video tape (European and American systems)
- > your own computer, printer (and paper), scanner, e-mail access -- it is sometimes possible to buy e-mail access for a limited period
- > consider comfort -- the weight of your computer, etc. and carrying it about to villages, on buses and other transportation
- > shoes -- standing waiting for bus, standing on the bus
- > other clothes and necessities of comfort flexibility -- lots of things don't work
- > buses, trains may not run, or may be too full
- > many people have not been paid \* may show up at archives and may not
- > this uncertainty necessitates flexibility or alternative research plans \* or the ability to be on the look-out for good data

Working with your colleagues:

- > be aware of different understandings of the field: what it is; what the important questions are

folklore examples of such an issue:

- > viewing folklore as necessarily old (archaic, and a province of old people) and rural
- > therefore it's hard to get data on contemporary practices -- they try to get you old people who will tell you about the past
- > they steer you away from urban sources

There are nationalist considerations \* especially outside Russia, in the republics of the Russian Federation, and in former republics of the USSR:

- > Here, as well as in Russian Russia, you may be directed not to straight data, but to data that will give you the impression they want you to have
- > Often they will try to make their country appear more advanced than it is, or more like the West, or more nationalistic, independent, anti-Communist.
- > This is in fact a relic of the Communist mentality (folklore viewed as evidence to prove one thesis or another, people can't be trusted to produce folklore properly by themselves).

Anti-Soviet drive:

- > Many folklorists tend to want to do away with all Soviet folklore, unless it's a folklore of camps and repression, not realizing that they're using almost Soviet cultural engineering practices to do so. They see it as a bad practice when the Soviets did it, but not when they themselves do it: Soviet influence must be undone!
- > It is therefore very difficult to collect Soviet data (unless it demonstrates some fault with the Soviet system), even though this is legitimate data too and needs to be collected ASAP.
- > There is a strong drive to do away with Soviet things in Russia, too; not just in the former republics

as they reinstate national language, culture, whatever, outside Russia.

> An example: the orthographic debates in Ukraine.

Working on-site -- as in the village:

> culture and courtesy -- how to behave

> dress -- what to wear where and when (men as well as women) -- be aware of different ideas of decency: sleeping with 3 guys in a train compartment is okay (there are techniques for changing clothes without being an exhibitionist), but showing up in shorts in a village is not

> recall the comfort question from before, but also considerations of age, gender -- how can you find out what is considered appropriate?

> It's a delicate balance -- do it their way and still admit that you are, after all, different

> Being different is NOT disadvantageous; it can create a context where you get very good material.

The question of payment also raises gender issues:

> paying informants, paying colleagues who accompany you or provide contacts

> there are various systems of ALTERNATE pay

> gifts, esp. for someone other than the informant, a helpful colleague

> providing work opportunities for colleagues or their students

> pay for their trip, for equipment, for wanted books; buy needed supplies

> help with publishing opportunities

Practical issues to consider as you are planning:

> food, lodging

> daily life (like hygiene)

> choose clothing from the practical point of view -- washing and drying

Photography -- what you can and cannot photograph:  
> different restrictions than in US  
> the use and the etiquette of still camera, of a video camera

Ethical issues:

> telling the truth can become much more thorny than you are used to -- never lie; but in some cases explaining exactly how it is in the US may create more confusion than it is worth  
> intimacy -- the kinds of questions you can ask your informants  
> what kinds of questions they are likely to ask you  
> continuing the relationship after you leave the country