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Folklore and Politics in the Soviet Union

The golden era of the study of folklore in the Soviet Union was the first decade after the Revolution, when the party and government, occupied with more urgent tasks, let the literary scholars and folklorists do their work relatively undisturbed. In 1925 the so-called "magna charta libertatis" for Soviet writers was issued by the Central Committee of the party, which permitted "free competition of various groups and currents."¹ As a result, the 1920s turned out to be rich and fruitful in literary scholarship, including folkloristics. In the study of folklore, different trends could freely coexist and thrive side by side. The most important of them were the historical school, Formalism, and the so-called Finnish school. The historical school continued the traditions of its leader Vsevolod Miller, whose first concern had been to find reflections of concrete historical reality in Russian *byliny* (epic songs). Thus the tendencies of the historical school are found in the commentaries to some *bylina* collections in 1918 and 1919, and also appeared strongly in the works of the brothers Boris and Iurii Sokolov, both of them disciples of Miller.

The Formalists Propp, Nikiforov, Skaftymov, Zhirmunsky, and others concentrated on certain formal aspects, with complete disregard for ideology and historical conditions. They studied the artistic form of folklore—its structure, style, verse, and language. Formalists produced a number of significant works—perhaps the highest achievements of Russian folklore scholarship. Here belongs, for example, V. Ia. Propp's famous study *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), which investigates the structure of fairy tales on the basis of the function of the dramatis personae and concludes that all Russian tales are uniform in their structure. A. I. Nikiforov's studies touch partly on the same problems. It is possible that the notion of "function" used by Propp was originally invented by Nikiforov.

A. P. Skaftymov's *Poetics and Genesis of Byliny* (1924) concludes that the *bylina* structure is based on the endeavor to create effects of surprise and

1. Gleb Struve, *Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin, 1917-1953* (Norman, Okla., 1971), p. 89.

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astonishment in the audience, which is achieved by an excessive use of contrasts in depicting the hero and his opponent. This build-up to the unexpected is resolved at the end of the *bylina*, when the underestimated hero destroys his seemingly all-powerful opponent with amazing ease. Skaftymov demonstrates that the negative attitude toward Prince Vladimir in some *byliny* is prompted by *bylina* structure rather than by ideological considerations. M. O. Gabel studied the action and dialogue of *byliny*, and V. M. Zhirmunsky examined the structure of lyrical songs and poetics of folklore.

The Finnish school or the historical-geographical method was concerned with the study of folk tales and legends. The goal of this method is to present the complete history of a tale by meticulous analysis of all the available versions and by considering all historical and geographical factors. The Finnish method was applied in Russia successfully by S. F. Oldenburg and especially by N. P. Andreev. Andreev was the student of one of the leaders of the historical-geographical method—the Estonian folklorist Walter Anderson—at the University of Kazan. He wrote his M.A. dissertation under Anderson and, with his assistance, translated the Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne's tale type index into Russian—at the same time that Stith Thompson translated it into English. Andreev's two model studies on legends applying this method were published in an international series (Folklore Fellows Communications) in Finland.

The brief period of considerable freedom in Russian folkloristics came to an end in the last years of the twenties, when the Stalin era was inaugurated, with the five-year plans, industrialization, and collectivization. Literature, under the dictatorship of RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), now "put on uniform" (using Max Eastman's apt characterization) and was enlisted in the service of the five-year plan.² After the disbanding of RAPP and other literary organizations and the creation of a single Union of Soviet Writers in 1932, literature—including folklore—was subjected to still stricter control by the government. Folklore was recognized as a significant factor in the formation of the "socialist culture," and the party became vitally interested in the activity of both narrators and folklorists. In this development, Maxim Gorky had no small share. At the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 Gorky gave the keynote speech, which, among other things, discussed the relations between folklore and labor. Gorky stressed (1) the close connection of folklore to the concrete life and working conditions of the people, for which reason its study should not be concerned with the abstract mythic-religious ideas, but must deal with concrete historical reality, work processes, and real interhuman relations, (2) the life optimism of folklore, which expresses the deepest moral and human aspirations of the masses and can have validity as the source of the world outlook of a people in its individual historical periods,

2. *Ibid.*, p. 221.

and (3) the high artistic value of folklore.³ According to Gorky: "The most vivid and profoundly conceived, artistically perfect hero-types were created by folklore, by the oral tradition of the working people. Hercules, Prometheus, Mikula Selyaninovich, Svyatogor, Dr. Faust, Vassilissa Premudraya, the ironical Ivan the Fool, always successful in everything he does . . . , they are all perfect in their way, and in their creation, reason and intuition, thought and feeling were harmoniously combined. Such a combination is possible only through direct participation in the creative activities of labour, in the struggle for life."⁴

Gorky's speech had far-reaching consequences. First, it opened the eyes of the rulers of Russia to the significance of folklore as a powerful force to advance communism, and served as a stimulus for them to initiate a large-scale collecting activity. Stalin himself is quoted as saying to the leaders of the Red Army ensemble: "You must supplement your repertoire with folk songs; use folk songs as extensively as possible."⁵ The collection of folklore was strongly supported by the party leaders and organizations. On L. M. Kaganovich's initiative the executive committee of the Moscow Oblast organized wide collecting of folklore in all of its area in 1934–35. Local centers of folklore were founded in numerous districts, and the collection of folklore was made obligatory for ethnographic organizations. The local intelligentsia, university students, and students of trade schools were mobilized for active collecting.⁶ The influential party papers, such as *Pravda* and others, published both appeals for collecting and samples of collected materials. Folklore materials began to appear also in local papers and magazines, sent in by teachers, agronomists, workers of machine-tractor stations, and members of the collective farms.⁷

Much care was devoted to the collection of biographical narratives and remembrances (*skazy*) from ordinary people about their own lives, about the events they had witnessed, and about the remarkable people they had met. These narratives were concerned with wives' sufferings under their despotic and drunken husbands, the events of revolution, civil war, restoration of the war-torn economy, collectivization of agriculture, and life in the Red Army. A

3. Alois Schmaus, *Probleme und Methoden der sowjetischen Folkloristik*, Wissenschaftliche Informationen zur Volkskunde, Altertumskunde und Kulturgeographie aus dem östlichen Europa, vol. 4 (Munich, 1959), pp. 13–14.

4. *Literature and Life: A Selection from Writings of Maxim Gorki*, trans. Edith Bone (London, 1946), p. 136.

5. *Ocherki russkogo narodno-poeticheskogo tvorchestva sovetskoi epokhi*, ed. A. M. Astakhova et al. (Moscow and Leningrad, 1952), p. 192.

6. A. M. Astakhova, "Voprosy izucheniia russkogo fol'klora v gody 1917–1944," in M. Ia. Mel't's, comp., *Russkii fol'klor: Bibliograficheskii ukazatel', 1917–1944* (Leningrad, 1966), pp. 18–19.

7. M. K. Azadovsky, "Sovetskaia fol'kloristika za 20 let," *Sovetskii fol'klor*, 6 (1939): 9.

favorite theme was the contrast between the old and the new mode of life. Some of the narratives are sincere and touching in their naïveté, such as one woman's story of how she sewed a button on Lenin's coat (which she was holding while Lenin gave a talk), and how she proudly recognized her button, which did not match the others, in the photographs of Lenin afterwards. The inclusion of this kind of personal material as folklore has raised justifiable questions.⁸

In the new situation, the study of folklore had to change its course. It now passed "beyond the limits of narrow and impractical academism" and began following the principles and methods of Marxism-Leninism. This meant the introduction of organized Soviet folklore, which aimed at the destruction of the past and the building up of communism. Folklorists had to recognize that "Soviet folklore constituted an effective means of agitation and propaganda for Communist ideas."⁹

The former trends, especially Formalism and the Finnish school, were declared harmful. The advocates of these trends had to admit their wrongdoing and were often made to recant. At a meeting of the Folklore Section of the Academy of Sciences in Leningrad in April 1936, one of the leading Formalists, Propp, publicly admitted "the failure of the attempts of the formalists to get out of the blind alley, into which the formal method of the fairy-tale study had led them." Andreev, the main representative of the Finnish comparative method, at the same meeting unmasked the real goals of the Finnish method: "to deprive the fairy-tale material of its sociopolitical significance and to lead the scholar from the study of the actual reality of the tale into pointless formal-logical abstractness."¹⁰ Zhirmunsky subjected to self-criticism his formalistic works and his former "shortsighted" attitude toward the sociology of Hans Naumann.¹¹

It did not take long before the harmfulness of the historical school as well was disclosed. Soviet folklorists had been unanimous in subscribing to the theory of the aristocratic origin of the *byliny*, which had been advanced by the main champion of the historical school, Vsevolod Miller, at the turn of this century. According to Miller, the *byliny* were created by the singers of the princes' retinue. They were taken over later by *skomorokhi*, the professional singers and buffoons of the lower classes. Only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did the *byliny* reach the peasants, by way of the *skomorokhi*. The theory of "gesunkenes Kulturgut," only slightly modified in detail, continued

8. Some of them are cited in Felix J. Oinas, "Folklore Activities in Russia," *Journal of American Folklore*, 74 (1961): 365-66.

9. Y. M. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore* (Detroit, 1971), p. 141.

10. M. Sh., "Fol'kloristika v SSSR," *Sovetskii fol'klor*, 1936, no. 4/5, p. 430.

11. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore*, p. 147.

to be shared by all folklorists in the Soviet Union until the mid-thirties, when the government and party decided to bring it in line with Soviet doctrine.

This great change is connected with the name of the Soviet poet laureate Demian Bedny. Bedny had written the libretto for a popular comic opera, *Bogatyri (The Epic Heroes)*, which had been presented in the Kamerny Theater in Moscow. In this opera Bedny depicted the *bylina* heroes in a derogatory manner. They were shown as representatives of the feudal aristocracy with all possible defects and vices, and the villains they fought were glorified as the "revolutionary element." This tendency to ridicule ancient heroes was in glaring contradiction to the "Soviet patriotism" which the government insisted on in the second half of the thirties. In mid-November 1936 Bedny's opera and folklorists in general came under heavy fire. The opera was, on order of a government committee, removed from the theater for misinterpreting Russian history and epic heroes. A series of articles began to appear in *Pravda*, and simultaneously in other leading newspapers, accusing the theater and especially the folklorists of falsifying the Russian historical past. Gorky's speech given at the writers' conference, which strongly emphasized folklore as the creation of the working people, no doubt provided ammunition for this attack. Curiously enough, the accusatory articles were written by nonfolklorists—literary scholars, historians, theoreticians of Marxism-Leninism, and others. Folklorists were condemned for their tendency to deprive the working people of creative abilities.

Under this heavy pressure, folklorists had to change their views about the origin of *byliny*. In 1937 the leading Russian folklorist, Iurii Sokolov, modified the former theory by allotting the working people an essential part in the creation of the *byliny*. He stressed that "the majority of them [*byliny*] came from the masses of the working people." This view was shared by all folklorists and nonfolklorists alike in their public pronouncements, and since then has become one of the cornerstones of Soviet folkloristics. However, objective study of the origin of the *byliny* shows the erroneousness of this theory. *Byliny* were most probably created by talented singers among the princes' retinue, just as the West European heroic epic was created and nurtured in court and aristocratic circles.¹²

In the middle of the thirties a new type of folklore made its appearance in Russia—Soviet *byliny*, Soviet songs, laments, tales, and so forth. These works imitated traditional folklore, making use of its motifs and poetical devices, but employing contemporary life as their subject. Their protagonists were—according to the narrators themselves—no longer the ancient epic heroes, but the

12. For a detailed discussion of the theory of the aristocratic origin of *byliny* and the dramatic events leading to its refutation in the Soviet Union see Felix J. Oinas, "The Problem of the Aristocratic Origin of Russian *Byliny*," *Slavic Review*, 30 (1971): 521.

“new Soviet hero-innovators and defenders of the socialist fatherland,” “the kolkhoz heroes and factory heroes.”¹³ Most often, the Soviet governmental and military leaders, such as Lenin, Stalin, Chapaev, and Voroshilov, functioned as the heroes of this folklore.

In the new songs, called *noviny* (as opposed to the *stariny* or “old songs”), the Soviet leaders are endowed with the same idealized qualities as Il'ia Muromets, Dobrynia Nikitich, and Alesha Popovich—bravery, resourcefulness, and self-sacrifice. Their adversaries are the “whites” (who correspond to the Tatars in *byliny*), headed by their leader Idolishche (“the most monstrous idol”). In the latter it is not difficult to recognize the tsar, the symbol of the old regime. Idolishche in the *noviny* appears as cruel, boastful, gluttonous, and cowardly. Thus the *noviny* have transposed the gallery of the old heroes and villains with their typical characteristics into Soviet reality and have assigned to them different roles.¹⁴ The best-known *noviny* singer was Marfa Kriukova from the White Sea region, one of the most talented of Russian folk singers.¹⁵

The *noviny* use the traditional *bylina* verse and the poetics characteristic of *byliny*, such as the constant epithets (*dobryi molodets* “good youth,” *ruki belye* “white hands,” *more sinee* “blue sea,” and so forth), commonplaces, and other devices. For example, like Vladimir of old, Stalin is described as walking in the Kremlin:

Сталин учал посреди горницы похаживать,
Белыми руками приразмахивать,
Черными кудрями принатраживать
И удумал-то он думу крепкую.
Он призвал к себе друзей-товарищов . . .¹⁶

Voroshilov is described as riding on his dragonlike horse in the ancient manner:

На коне сидит да рыцарь чудный же,
Повода держит в рученьке во левой,
Во правой руке — трубочку подзорную,
На коне сидит да все ясен сокол,
На имя Клим да Ворошилов-свет.¹⁷

13. *Ocherki*, pp. 223–24.

14. Schmaus, *Probleme und Methoden*, pp. 411–17.

15. For Kriukova's *noviny* see Karl Hartmann, “Die Rhapsodin M. S. Krjukova, ihre sowjetischen Volkspoeme und deren Verhältnis zur Tradition des grossrussischen Heldenliedes,” *Die Welt der Slaven*, 2 (1957): 394–418.

16. [M. S. Kriukova], *Noviny Marfy Semenovny Kriukovoi*, ed. Viktorin Popov (Moscow, 1939), p. 96. Translation: “Stalin began walking in the middle of the hall,/Waving his white hands about,/Shaking his black curls,/And he thought a strong thought./He summoned his friends and companions. . . .”

17. Kriukova, *Noviny*, p. 35. Translation: “And on the horse sits a wondrous knight,/He holds the reins in his left hand,/In his right hand he holds a telescope./And on the

Chapaev's heroic departure to meet the enemies is pictured in the traditional way:

Забил его конь в землю ножкой правою,
 Мать-сыра-земля да всколыбалася,
 Во темных-то лесах древа-то пошаталися,
 В море Хвалынском вода волной разливалася.¹⁸

For the characterization of the Soviet heroes elevated symbolism is employed. Voroshilov is a "bright falcon" in the song cited above, or "Klim the locksmith, glorious Voroshilov." Chapaev becomes a "golden-winged eagle flying over the glorious Volga steppes." Reference is made to the "heroic Red Cossack Budenny from the quiet Don." The "whites" are characterized in the journalistic jargon as "ferocious lions and infamous dogs."¹⁹

Folklorists greeted the *noviny* enthusiastically as representing the "renaissance" of the epic.²⁰ Iurii Sokolov wrote about Marfa Kriukova's *noviny*: "As a result, we have something new, original, independent, which in certain specific aspects . . . even recalls the 'ancient songs,' but as a whole is sharply distinguished from them, particularly by its great sustained lyric quality, by the free plan of its composition."²¹

In addition to the *noviny*, fairy tales on contemporary themes were also created. Their heroes were the Soviet leaders, members of the collective farms, and workers. These tales, invented by the tellers, were mostly allegorical. The truth that some heroes were seeking turned out to be the October Revolution. The magic ring was the symbol of the scientific tasks that the polar explorers (*cheliushkintsy*) had to solve. Living and dead water was interpreted as the immortality and invincibility of the Soviet people, and so forth.²² In order to give some idea of the Soviet tales—often quite banal—I will summarize here one such tale, entitled "The Scarlet Flower," created by the Olonetsian narrator F. P. Gospodarev. During the class struggle in the village, a kulak kills the chairman of a collective farm, a Communist. After the hero is buried, a scarlet flower grows out of the Order of Lenin that is pinned on his jacket. The flower betrays the place of his burial. The grave is dug open and the hero is found to be miraculously still alive.

horse sits our bright falcon,/And his name is Klim Voroshilov, our light." (Sokolov, *Russian Folklore*, p. 679.)

18. Kriukova, *Noviny*, p. 75. Translation: "His horse hammered the earth with its right foot,/Mother moist earth heaved up,/In the dark forests the trees swayed,/The waters in the Caspian Sea spread out in billows."

19. Alexander Kaun, *Soviet Poets and Poetry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1943), pp. 185, 189.

20. Astakhova, "Voprosy," p. 28.

21. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore*, pp. 676-77.

22. *Ocherki*, pp. 319-23.

The creation of new songs and tales was strongly encouraged and assisted by the government. Writers and professional folklorists were assigned as tutors to the master singers and tellers, to help them with facts and ideology. Thus the writer Viktorin Popov assisted Kriukova for years. He wrote down her *noviny*, corrected and edited them, and arranged for their publication. According to Popov, he helped the singer place certain events in their correct historical sequence, eliminate parts that had no direct relation to the basic theme, curtail superfluous repetitions and descriptions that were too drawn out, and eliminate the peculiarities of her White Sea dialect.²³ Scholars who investigate Kriukova's *noviny* have difficulty ascertaining how much the printed versions reflect the singer's own artistic intentions. Other noted singers and tellers also had tutors. For example, M. R. Golubkova was helped by the writer N. P. Leontiev, and P. I. Riabinin-Andreev and F. A. Konashkov by the folklorist M. I. Kostrova. The tutors helped their disciples, among other things, to find suitable topics for their creations from newspapers and novels.

The master narrators were invited to provincial cities and to Moscow and Leningrad, where they visited museums and attended lectures, concerts, and theater performances. Radios were installed in their homes, and subscriptions to newspapers and magazines were provided for them. They were presented with small home libraries. The master narrators were even sent on "creative missions" (*tvorcheskije komandirovki*). Thus in 1938 Kriukova undertook a trip, with her mentor Popov and his wife, to the Caucasus, the home country of Stalin. The Olonets singer Mikhail Riabinin was sent to Moscow, where he visited historical-revolutionary museums to collect materials for his extensive life story of Lenin.

Special meetings for narrators were organized by the All-Union House of Folk Art in Moscow, by the Karelian Research Institute in Petrozavodsk, and by other organizations. At these meetings the narrators had an opportunity to discuss their artistic experiences and present their creations, and lectures were given and seminars held for their edification. According to Soviet folklorists this "party leadership directed the productive talents to the creation of the works that were necessary for all the people and helped the building of socialism."²⁴ In 1938 a group of the most talented narrators were elected full members of the Union of Soviet Writers (though some were illiterate) and were awarded the Order of Lenin.²⁵

The works of Soviet folklore, composed under the proper direction, were collected and made public through all available media—print, radio, cinema, theater, and phonograph records. The illusory hope was that these songs and

23. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore*, p. 677.

24. *Ocherki*, pp. 194–96.

25. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore*, p. 681.

tales would be accepted by the workers and would stimulate them to further socialist victories.²⁶

During World War II folklore, like literature, had to give its share to the war effort. The individual creations by narrators were continued, filled now with flaming love for their home country and hatred toward the enemy. Even the ancient *bylina* heroes themselves were brought to the Soviet scene. Thus in one *novina* Il'ia Muromets calls for the defense of the fatherland, and in another he, Dobrynia, and Alesha fight in the ranks of the Red Army against the enemy.²⁷ This reminds us of an Old Russian war story of the thirteenth or fourteenth century in hagiographic style, "The Life of Alexander Nevsky," in which the long-deceased saints Boris and Gleb come to the help of Alexander in his fight against the invading Swedes. The notable singers and tellers, grouped into teams, performed for the fighting men at the front and for collective farmers and soldiers in hospitals at the rear. Folklorists made extensive collections of folklore with war themes. This material was published hastily in huge quantities to boost the morale of both soldiers and civilians.²⁸

After the war Russian folklorists had to go through another period of tribulation, perhaps the hardest one to endure. The era of the ideological dictatorship of Zhdanov, the so-called Zhdanovshchina, which began in 1946, soon developed into a full-scale anti-West witch hunt. The critics and folklorists were accused of adhering to the comparative, "bourgeois," "cosmopolitan" theories of Alexander Veselovsky, an eminent Russian literary scholar of the nineteenth century who until then had enjoyed great esteem in the Soviet Union.²⁹ Their main guilt was found to be servility before the West and "rootless cosmopolitanism." Among the folklorists, Propp, Zhirmunsky, Azadovsky, and others were taken to task. Unfortunately for Propp, he had just published his *Historical Roots of the Fairy Tale* (1946), in which he connected the origin of the fairy tale with initiation rites. In addition to Russia, his work covered Western Europe, classical antiquity, the East, the peoples of Northern Siberia, American Indians, African Negroes, Australian aborigines, and others. This work now became the lightning rod of hostile criticism because of the author's alleged cosmopolitanism. The book was said to look more like a foreign than a Soviet work and to reflect more the tendencies of bourgeois folklorists than those of the Soviet and the "brotherly Slavic nations." Owing to Propp's abundant use of quotations from scholars such as Frazer, Boas, and Kroeber, the

26. Richard M. Dorson, "Concepts of Folklore and Folklife Studies," in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago, 1972), p. 18.

27. Hartmann, "Die Rhapsodin M. S. Krjukova," p. 413, n. 66.

28. Astakhova, "Voprosy," pp. 45-47; V. K. Sokolova, "Sovetskaiia fol'kloristika k 40-letiiu oktiabria," *Sovetskaiia etnografiia*, 1957, no. 5, pp. 76-77.

29. Struve, *Russian Literature*, pp. 358 ff.

book was compared to a Berlin or London telephone directory.³⁰ Zhirmunsky, Azadovsky, and Bogatyrev were also found guilty, because they had not foreseen the imminent change in the literary policy and had continued to work in the cosmopolitan, comparative, or Formalist spirit.

Toward the end of the forties, several inquisitional meetings were arranged to reprimand the scholars for their errors and to get them to confess. One such meeting, organized by the Council of Leningrad University in 1948, is described vividly by Gleb Struve.³¹ On this occasion, literary scholars and folklorists one after another had to ascend the rostrum and do penance, renouncing their former works and promising to “reform.” For instance, Propp publicly accepted his critics’ charges of harmful cosmopolitanism and urged that it was high time “to break with the backward tradition” and “to create works worthy of our age.” Zhirmunsky admitted that his position in the discussion on Veselovsky had been wrong from the political point of view and therefore also from the scholarly one. “The party’s directives,” he said, “open the only right path for correcting our mistakes.” Azadovsky regretted his adherence to the “old pre-Marxian science of literature” and warned scholars against “sliding down onto the tracks of bourgeois cosmopolitanism.”

After their former research trends had been branded as erroneous, the folklorists were faced with the dilemma of finding research topics that could be dealt with safely in the spirit of the Zhdanovshchina. One such was the progressive currents in folklore, as represented by the so-called revolutionary democrats—Belinsky, Dobroliubov, and Chernyshevsky. It could be mentioned here that I. S. Dolinin, a noted literary scholar who had devoted most of his career to the study of Dostoevsky, announced during the penitential session that he would “give up” Dostoevsky and turn his attention to the revolutionary democrats.³² Folklorists also found the study of these democrats under the new conditions to be both safe and wise. As a matter of fact, studies on them acquired the dimensions of a veritable flood.³³ Since Belinsky had made some derogatory remarks on folklore and undervalued its poetic and historic significance,³⁴ every effort was made now to reinterpret his negative remarks in a positive way. This was done by labeling the dissident views “slandorous” and “reactionary,”³⁵ as was common in those days.

30. A. Tarasenkov, “Kosmopolity ot literaturovedeniia,” *Novyi mir*, 24, no. 2 (1948): 136.

31. Gleb Struve, “The Soviets Purge Literary Scholarship,” *New Leader*, Apr. 2, 1949, pp. 8–9. Based on “Bol’shevistskaia partiinost’: Osnova sovetskogo literaturovedeniia,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Nov. 13, 1948, p. 1.

32. Struve, *Russian Literature*, p. 363.

33. A. M. Astakhova, “Voprosy izucheniia russkogo fol’klora v poslevoennyi period (1945–1959),” in M. Ia. Mel’tz, comp., *Russkii fol’klor: Bibliograficheskii ukazatel’, 1945–1959* (Leningrad, 1961), pp. 33–34.

34. Sokolov, *Russian Folklore*, p. 122.

35. See, for example, M. K. Azadovsky, “Revoliutsionno-demokraticheskaia fol’kloris-

Propp, after having been censured, also sought refuge among the revolutionary democrats. It was Belinsky in whom he found the clue for correct interpretation of Russian *byliny*. Belinsky had claimed that scholars should first of all formulate the "idea" of an artistic work. The idea of a song, which is always closely connected with the historic struggle of the people in a given epoch, gives the scholar reliable criteria, according to Belinsky, for assigning it to a definite period. Propp took this concept of the "idea" of a work from Belinsky and applied it rigorously in his new study, *The Russian Heroic Epic*.³⁶ In this work Propp first established the basic idea of the *byliny* and then assigned them to different (hypothetical) periods of Russian history, beginning with the so-called primitive communal system and ending with the contemporary Communist regime. However, Propp's interpretation of individual *byliny* and *bylina* cycles was termed by critics as "very questionable."³⁷

The Zhdanovshchina also left its mark on other works of folklore. The new folklore textbook for universities, edited by P. G. Bogatyrev (1954), gives hardly any credit to foreign schools in the development of Russian folkloristics, but argues that it developed from indigenous national roots. The role of the "revolutionary democrats" is grossly exaggerated, as is Gorky's and Stalin's. A book review on Afanasiev's folk-tale collection written by Dobroliubov is eulogized as "a new stage not only in the study of fairy tales, but also in the whole of Russian folklore." The most important Russian folk-tale scholar, Propp, is passed over in silence.³⁸

Since Stalin's death and especially after de-Stalinization in 1956, a certain liberalization has become apparent in the spiritual life of Russia, and it has affected also the study of folklore. The most visible aspect was the disappearance of Stalin's name from folklore studies and from folk songs and tales. Though Stalin had still figured as an authority on folklore in the first edition of Bogatyrev's textbook, his name was completely eliminated from the second edition, published two years later (1956).

The condemnation of the so-called personality cult of Stalin brought about also the revaluation of the new products of Soviet folklore—the *noviny*, laments, and tales with Soviet themes. As mentioned before, these works were highly regarded during Stalin's lifetime. But the Soviet folklorists changed their minds right after Stalin's death, and their judgment became especially harsh after the condemnation of Stalin. Aspects that were now especially criticized in the new creations of Soviet folklore were the discrepancy between modern

tika," in P. G. Bogatyrev, ed., *Russkoe narodnoe poeticheskoe tvorchestvo*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1956), p. 90.

36. V. Ia. Propp, *Russkii geroicheskii epos* (Leningrad, 1955), pp. 18–19.

37. See, for example, A. M. Astakhova, *Byliny: Itogi i problemy izucheniia* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1966), p. 120.

38. Felix J. Oinas, "Folklore in Russia," *Journal of American Folklore*, 70 (1957): 191–92.

content and archaic form, creative help rendered to singers and tellers by writers and folklorists, and the fact that the new creations remained on paper and did not enter oral tradition. The songs and tales created to extol Stalin and his cohorts were labeled "pseudo-folklore," and were no longer created or studied. The verdict given by A. N. Nechaev is characteristic of the attitude of Russian folklorists as a whole in the post-Stalin era, though it concerns only the new fairy tales: "All the above-mentioned and other tales [those with Soviet themes] do not have any relation to Soviet folklore, since they are a product of individual creation. . . . 'The Soviet fairy tales' have not become the property of the people, and therefore there is absolutely no reason to consider them as Soviet folklore. They are simply unsuccessful literary works."³⁹

There has been a trend toward loosening the grip of the party and government on folkloristics. It seems that the wholesale rejection of everything "formalistic" has been given up. In 1958 the major portion of Skaftymov's *Poetics and Genesis of Byliny*, condemned previously, was republished. Ten years later, another formalistic study, Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, also appeared in a second edition, with an extensive survey of "the structural and typological study of the fairy tale" by E. M. Meletinsky appended. The republication of Propp's work as well as the high praise accorded it by Meletinsky (who emphasized "the absolute dimensions of Propp's discovery") was prompted, not in small measure, by the enthusiasm this work had aroused widely in the West.

The historical school, in disfavor since the thirties, has come again to the fore. The main reason for its condemnation had been its association with the theory of the aristocratic origin of the *byliny*. Since supporters of that theory were silenced, the historical interpretation of the *byliny* could be permitted once again. The revival of the historical school at the beginning of the sixties is the work of two scholars, B. A. Rybakov and M. M. Plisetsky. Rybakov, by education a historian, goes even further than his master Vsevolod Miller (whom he is not willing to recognize) and uses the *byliny*, along with chronicles, as reliable source material for the study of Russian history. Plisetsky is much more selective in his use of the historical data found in the *byliny*. However, the neohistorical school in Russian folkloristics has not produced significant results so far.

More fruitful has been the recent research in one folklore genre, the ballad, which had been neglected during the first forty years of Soviet rule. It is possible that ballads, with their emphasis on the purely personal problems of their protagonists, did not lend themselves readily to Marxist-Leninist interpretation.

39. A. N. Nechaev, "O tozhdestve literatury i fol'klora," in *Voprosy narodno-poeticheskogo tvorchestva: Problemy sootnosheniia fol'klora i deistvitel'nosti* (Moscow, 1960), p. 140.

Only one work on the subject, the anthology of V. I. Chernyshev, was published in Russia in the thirties. But since the late fifties the ballad genre has become the object of intensive investigation. This investigation has been carried on primarily by one man, D. M. Balashov, who has published numerous valuable studies and a modern ballad anthology.

The ban has been partly lifted even from religious songs (*dukhovnye stikhi*). During the Revolution and the first years of Soviet rule, examples of religious songs and a couple of studies on them (by V. P. Adrianova, M. V. Beliaev, and others) had been published. However, with the intensification of religious persecution and antireligious propaganda, the collection and study of these songs was soon suspended. The only recent study on religious songs to come to my attention, Iu. A. Novikov's survey of their evolution (1971), makes repeated references to the manuscript collections of religious songs from the fifties and sixties.⁴⁰ This gives evidence of a certain tolerance of them during recent decades.

The school that still remains taboo in Soviet folklore research is the Finnish school, owing to its stress on the international character of folklore and the dissemination of folklore primarily by way of borrowing. Since the Soviets are not willing to admit foreign influences in their history and culture, the trends toward comparative research in the West prompt only abusive remarks from them.

In 1958 the late Zhirmunsky succeeded in showing how folklorists can by-pass the assumption of borrowing. He advanced the so-called historical-typological theory, according to which the similarities in numerous epic plots of the feudal period among different nationalities are the result of similar conditions in their social development, and not of any influences.⁴¹ This theory is a modification of views put forth by the anthropological school in the West about a century ago. The basic difference between the anthropologists and Zhirmunsky is that the former stressed the psychic unity of man, and Zhirmunsky the similarity in social conditions, as the reason folklore is identical in different areas. Zhirmunsky's ideas have been accepted most favorably in Russia and her satellites. Although polygenesis, or parallel independent development, cannot in some cases be disproved, the rigorous application of this method leads unavoidably to arbitrariness. When motifs of a certain theme have exact

40. Iu. A. Novikov, "K voprosu ob evoliutsii dukhovnykh stikhov," *Russkii fol'klor*, vol. 12 (Leningrad, 1971), pp. 208, 209, 211, and passim.

41. This theory was outlined in Zhirmunsky's paper given in 1958 at the Fourth International Congress of Slavists and later was republished, in a slightly reworked form, in his *Narodnyi geroicheskiĭ epos* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1962), pp. 75–194; see especially pp. 130 ff. The same theory had been applied by D. S. Likhachev to Old Russian literature some time earlier; see his *Vozniknovenie russkoi literatury* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1952), p. 143 and passim.

parallels among several nations, the possibility of borrowing can hardly be denied. For example, the Germanic epic theme of the killing of Siegfried during the hunt, when he bends down to drink from a spring, has exact counterparts in Old French, Russian, Serbian, and other epics. The coincidences in detail, despite Zhirmunsky's objection, make borrowing still the most convincing solution.

The strong ideological preoccupation of the Soviet folklorists makes any understanding between them and Western folklorists impossible. They divide the folklorists outside the Soviet orbit into two distinct groups—the good guys and the bad guys. The good guys are those who accept their Marxism-Leninism-oriented interpretation of folklore, and the bad ones (who, of course, greatly predominate) are those who do not accept it. Characteristic is L. M. Zemlianova's article "The Struggle Between the Reactionary and the Progressive Forces in Contemporary American Folkloristics."⁴² Here the American leftist folklorist Irwin Silber is praised for his "recognition of the class nature of folklore" and for "progressive ideas against slavery." Zemlianova's *bête noire* is the leading American folklorist Richard Dorson, who "denies the leading role of the masses in the history of society and culture." This example of classifying folklorists based on their attitude toward Communist ideology can easily be multiplied.

The road of Russian folkloristics under the Soviets has been full of surprises. The free and promising initial development of folkloristics came to a stop at the beginning of the thirties when it had to begin to follow the Marxist-Leninist line. In the second half of the thirties, the folklorists were compelled to denounce their valuable former work as erroneous. About ten years later, during the Zhdanovshchina, they had to go through another period of humiliation, with forced confessions and recantations. With de-Stalinization the folklorists have received, at least temporarily, more freedom. However, they are still very much restricted in their choice of methods. This, coupled with the ideological restrictions, is bound to affect their accomplishments.

42. *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 1 (1964): 130–44.