

After the Fall Folkloristics in Ukraine After 1991

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Article abstract

Works published during the first years of independence show that post-Soviet folkloristics in Ukraine were in a state of flux. In spite of the eclipse of state funding and the concomitant initial period of disorientation, this period is also characterized by a number of important innovations that were especially significant for the advancement of Ukrainian folklore scholarship. However, some areas of investigation (such as folk religion) remain understudied.

AFTER THE FALL

Folkloristics in Ukraine After 1991¹

Robert B. Klymasz

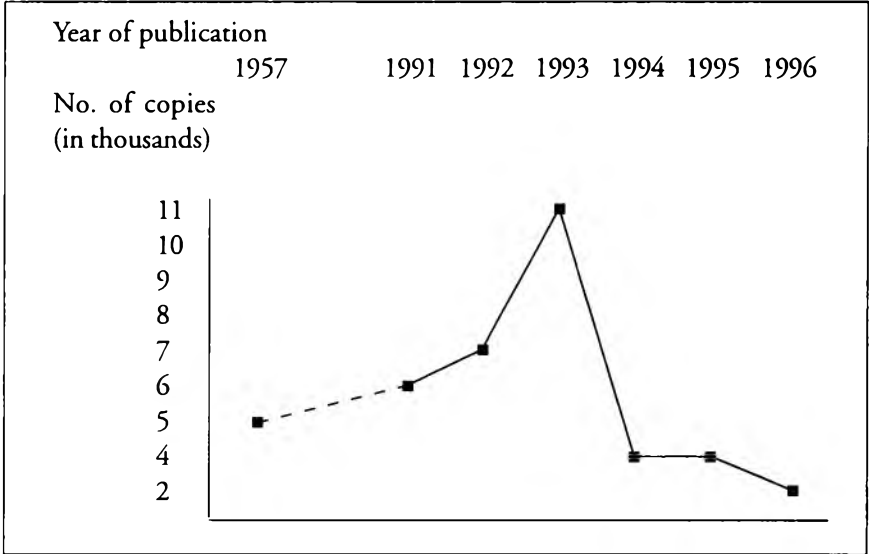
CCFCS — Canadian Museum of Civilization

In a critique of “Folklore Politics in the Soviet Ukraine” first published over twenty years ago in 1975 I drew attention to “the strictures that have made Ukrainian folkloristics under the Soviets a field only partially credible and a discipline deprived of its full potential” (Klymasz 1975, 1978). The present report is essentially bibliographical in nature and cites several critical publications to offer an update: it looks briefly at the impact of political independence (officially declared in 1991) on folkloristics in Ukraine and the concomitant eclipse of a state ideology that, often ruthlessly, worked to formalise and institutionalise the subordination of folklore and folkloristics to the interests of the state.

Ukraine’s official and, until recently, sole folklore journal — *Narodna tvorchist’ ta etnografia* [Folk/people’s creativity and ethnography] — provides a convenient tool that serves to trace and measure these developments. *NTE* (my abbreviation for this journal) first appeared in 1925 but soon ceased publication due to a hostile political situation and the onslaught of World War II. In 1957, however, it resurfaced as a bimonthly dedicated to serving as a propaganda vehicle — a mission it fulfilled admirably (Klymasz 1976: 305-306). In keeping with standard Soviet practice, publishing data for every issue cites the number of copies printed. (*NTE* continued this practice after 1991 while other publications dropped it.) The following tabulation of printed copies for selected issues of *NTE* published between 1957 and 1996, inclusive, mirrors the euphoria that came with independence (culminating in 1993 with the publication of 11, 830 copies for issue no. 5/6 in that year) and the subsequent

1. An earlier version of this report was delivered in St. John’s, Newfoundland on June 7, 1997 at the 21st Annual Meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada.

systemic collapse that accompanied this crucial period in the history of modern Ukraine (as reflected in the dramatic drop to 1290 copies for issue no. 4 in 1996)²:



The insecurity and disorientation mirrored in these figures is also reflected in the content matter for *NTE* during this period. The journal's loss of function as a state-supported propaganda vehicle opened its pages to the expression of materials that were no longer considered taboo. For instance, over a period of only one decade, from 1980 to 1990, *NTE's* covers departed from customary visual presentations of communist kitsch (folk portraiture featuring Lenin was always politically correct along with emblematic images of assorted hammers and sickles), and moved to photographs of costumed cossacks parading with Ukraine's national blue-and-yellow flag, religious iconography, Easter eggs, and even a touch of soft erotica. This release from the old ways was accented in 1991 with the publication of the first in a series of articles authored from abroad and saluting the centenary of Ukrainian settlement in Canada.

2. The actual figures cited for selected issues of *NTE*, 1957-1996, inclusive, are as follows: 1957:1(5,000 copies); 1991:2(6,500), 5(6,410), 6(6,400); 1992:1(7,380), 2(7,500), 4(7,500), 5/6(7,450); 1993:1(11,235), 2(11,610), 3(11,720), 4(11,780), 5/6(11,830); 1994:4(4,030); 5/6(4,370); 1995:1(4,350), 2/3(4,510), 4/6(2,610); 1996:1(2,560), 2/3(2,700), 4(1,290).

The search for new directions is also reflected in the variety of radically new material selected for publication during this period. This material ranges from discussions of folksongs and dances repressed by the Soviets for political reasons to an article on one family's Ukrainian museum in Prague — a major breakthrough, since the article legitimises the viability and importance of private collections of folk art as opposed to state-controlled collections. (An important figure in this regard was the avid private collector of Ukrainian folk art and related antiquities, Ivan M. Honchar [1911-1993], whose efforts were held suspect and repressed by the Soviet authorities for many years.) Other sensitive topics have also surfaced in *NTE* and in other publications; these include political humour, the paramilitary folksong tradition of Ukrainian's anti-Soviet, underground resistance, and such tragic events as the liquidation of itinerant bards and minstrels from the 1920s to the 1940s, the 1933 famine, and the Chernobyl nuclear-plant disaster. Of course, an important ongoing trend is the rehabilitation of folklorists — academics, enthusiasts, old and new —, whose works and activities were blacklisted and therefore banned from the pages of *NTE*. This process has included the reprinting of classic collections by such prominent figures as Panteleimon Kulish (1819-1897), whose two volumes of *Zapiski o iuzhnoi Rusi* [Notes about Southern Rus'], originally published over a century earlier in St Petersburg, Russia, 1856-57, reappeared in Kyiv, in 1994; and Pavlo P. Chubyns'kyi (1839-1884) whose findings concerning Ukrainian folk beliefs and superstitions were published in Kyiv in 1995 as a two-volume compilation, *Mudrist' vikiu* [Wisdom of the ages].

The removal of exclusive state support has jeopardised the continued viability of *NTE* which now, for the first time, finds that it needs to compete with others, most notably the spanking new, western oriented (and subsidised) journal: *Rodovid*. Meanwhile, the strengthening of contacts with North American scholars specialising in Ukrainian folkloristics (such as Natalie Kononenko, William Noll, and Bohdan Medwidsky) has produced several fruitful, co-operative endeavours. Especially significant are the various joint efforts organised by/with the Ryl's'kyi Institute of Art, Folklore and Ethnology (Academy of Sciences), Kyiv, and the American Folklife Centre at the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C. , and with the Huculak Chair of Ukrainian Culture and Ethnography at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta.³

3. In this connection, see, for example, William Noll (1993: 3-5); and the various issues of *Ukrainian Ethnography News* published since 1994 by the Huculak Chair of Ukrainian Culture and Ethnography at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta.

Also noteworthy are the announcements of international conferences and study programs that welcome foreign participants.⁴

This new open-door approach has already produced works of outstanding significance. These include the publication of works that are chiefly of a catch up nature, such as, for example, Olena Boriak's indispensable guide to ethnographic questionnaires dating from the second half of the eighteenth century up to and including the twentieth: *Materialy z istorii narodoznavstva v Ukraini: kataloh etnografichnykh prohram (druha polovyna XVIII-XX st.)* (Kyiv 1994). The lifting of barriers that isolated Ukrainian folkloristics from investigative trends in other countries is best reflected in a compilation of forty-five papers on "Ukrainian Folk Art in the Notions of International Terminology: Primitive Art, Folklore, Amateur Art, Naive Art, Kitsch...", *Ukrains'ka narodna tvorchist' u poniattiakh mizhnarodnoi terminolohii. Prymityv, fol'klor, amatorstvo, naiu, kitch...* (Kyiv, 1996). Also exemplary is I. Liashenko's excellent compilation of authoritative and occasionally provocative essays on theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of Ukrainian cultural expression within the context of the global village, *Ukrains'ka khudozhnia kul'tura*, (Kyiv, 1996); a serious, scholarly handbook (published as a textbook for college-level students), this collection of fifty-two papers offers a new operative framework for Ukrainian folkloristics and takes into account a wide range of diachronic and synchronic variables that are considered to be important for the future development of Ukrainian folkloristics. Themes that dominate this book include the links between folklore and professionalism, technology, mass communication, and the current period of cultural renaissance.

A major area of study remains barely touched: folk religion. In this connection, a comparative glance at folkloristics in neighbouring Russia, for instance, points to a strong and certainly warranted development of research on folklore vis-à-vis a wide spectrum of religious phenomena in Russia. As heirs to a hegemonic scholarly tradition, the Russian folklore school today is positioned to exploit its privileged past to pursue new directions of enquiry. As evidence one could cite the all-Russian issue of *Ethnologie française* (vol. 26 [1996], no. 4) published in Paris, France, and the publication of a new series

4. In this regard, the recently formed Kyiv-based Centre for the Study of Oral History and Culture organised an international conference on "Problems in Oral History Research on East European Villages of the 1920's-1940's," for August 4-7, 1998 at the Cherkasy Ethnographic Museum, followed by an optional fieldwork opportunity.

of scholarly papers on Orthodoxy and Russian folk culture (*Pravoslavie i russkaia narodnaia kul'tura*) initiated in Moscow in 1994. One may argue that, in contrast to the Russian situation, contemporary folkloristics in Ukraine needs more time to recover from the devastation of earlier decades; many large “white-outs” (commonly termed “*bili pliamy*” in Ukrainian scholarship) remain, and only time and adequate resources will help rectify the situation. The ongoing process of reclamation leaves little energy for breaking new ground. The current period of adjustment in Ukrainian folkloristics remains tied to a heightened sense of nationalism that is largely linked to the relics of a golden past and focused on rigid continuities, antiquities, retentions, and historicity. The initial, reactionary period remains generally blind to pluralism, and the search continues for a new godfather to replace the old — as underlined in 1992 when the second issue of *NTE* was introduced by an Easter message (on page 3) from one of Ukraine’s leading church figures who exhorted the readers of *NTE* to propagate “our Christian ideals.” Obviously, then, folklore studies in Ukraine are still in a state of flux and, as elsewhere, many roads remain unexplored. There are pitfalls to avoid. Paradoxically, however, the future for Ukrainian folkloristics has never looked brighter.

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