

Tradition in Two Worlds: A Russian-American Cultural Exchange

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On a warm April evening in 1990 on a bank of the Dnepr River in Kiev, I was sharing a traditional Central Asian meal with the Uzbek delegation to the Second International Folklore Festival. A Russian representative of the Soviet Ministry of Culture raised his glass to the success of the festival and invited everyone present to the next international Soviet-sponsored festival planned for Tashkent in 1992. I replied with an Arabic qualifying phrase used in most Muslim countries, *insh'allah* — “if God wills.” It seemed a precarious time to be proposing international festivals. Indeed, by 1992 Tashkent was the capital of independent Uzbekistan.

The Kiev festival itself, in fact, was not a success, and everything wrong with it was symptomatic of the political problems facing the Soviet state. Folklore troupes costumed and choreographed by Moscow represented each republic. The resentment over this kind of co-optation of local culture reflected a larger unease with Moscow's political and economic control. During the festival, Ukrainians continued demonstrations and discussions into the night in the center of town. Within 16 months Ukraine was also an independent nation.

The participation of a group of 25 traditional American musicians in the Kiev festival was part of a larger scholarly and artistic exchange begun in 1987, three years earlier, between the Soviet Ministry of Culture and the Smithsonian Institution. The eight-year old exchange continues today, in spite of radical changes in the cultural climate of both countries.

Among these changes is the critical role that culture has come to play in national discourse. In Russia the question of cultural iden-

tity — specifically, the perception that Soviet governments stifled the development of local identity — was central to much of the discussion leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Events like the 1990 Kiev festival were expressions of a centralized and, by implication, repressive arts bureaucracy.

In the United States controversies have also raged over the role of government in all spheres of life, including culture. Unlike most of their Western counterparts, including the Soviets, American leaders have been hesitant to give any support to the arts; no administration has ever seriously considered the formation of a U.S. Department of Culture, and now even a small grant-giving agency such as the National Endowment for the Arts is beleaguered.

Our lack of a centralized arts bureaucracy or policy-making office surprises many official visitors, as it certainly did two members of the Soviet Ministry of Culture who attended the 1987 Festival of American Folklife. The delegation had come to Washington as part of a program suggested by then-Secretary of the Smithsonian Robert McC. Adams to develop a series of collaborative projects between the Institution and the Soviet Union. During these early years of *perestroika*, both Soviets and Americans were moving warily, unfamiliar with the new terrain and the different ways that the two governments viewed culture.

In spite of some misgivings, the Smithsonian and the Soviet Ministry signed a cooperative agreement in 1987. A series of exchange programs were developed from proposals made by Dr. Margarita Mazo, then a scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center. These included a Festival program of Soviet artists in Washington in 1988, the participation by tradi-

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tional American artists in festivals in Moscow in 1988, in Kiev in 1990, as mentioned above, and finally an exchange of American and Soviet scholars to carry out research in cognate communities of Russians and Russian Americans, Ukrainians and Ukrainian Americans, and Uzbek and Uzbek Americans.

Negotiations for the participation of the Soviet artists at the 1988 Festival were challenging. It was particularly difficult to persuade Soviet bureaucrats to undertake research in local communities with the specific purpose of identifying traditional artists to represent contemporary Soviet life at an international festival. Academy-trained folklore troupes who were based in Moscow or other capital cities, and whose connections to the traditions they performed were romantic, nationalistic, but rarely lived day to day, had always represented the Soviet Union in international events.

Working closely with several scholars of Soviet traditions in the United States, the Center requested that local artists rather than theatrical troupes and amateur performers be invited to the Festival, and, to that end, asked that Smithsonian staff be part of the selection process. In the spirit of *perestroika*, officials agreed. Research was carried out, and 35 participants from nine republics and regions throughout the U.S.S.R. were selected for the 1988 program, many from republics that are now independent.

The Festival research developed into a scholarly exchange that has continued through the upheavals in the former Soviet Union. The Center and outside scholars have been working separately with the Russian, Uzbek, and Ukrainian Ministries of Culture. American scholars have done work in each country, while ex-Soviet scholars have been working in the United States. The Russian project has teamed Dr. Margarita Mazo, an ethnomusicologist from the Ohio State University, with Dr. Irina Pozdeeva, a specialist on religious culture at Moscow University, and Dr. Serafima Nikitina, a linguist with the Russian Academy of Sciences. The study of Bukharan Jewish culture in Uzbekistan and in Queens, New York,



Photo courtesy Margarita Mazo



Photo by Pete Reiniger

has paired Dr. Ted Levin, a folklorist and ethnomusicologist from Dartmouth College, with Dr. Otanazar Matyakubov, an ethnomusicologist at the Tashkent State Conservatory. The Ukrainian project is led by Dr. William Noll, formerly of the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard, and Dr. Valentyna Borysenko of the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. The first fruits of this research have included four Smithsonian/Folkways recordings of music of people from the former Soviet Union related to the 1988 Festival program. A fifth recording of Old Believer music from Stavropol in southern Russia will be released in conjunction with this summer's Festival program.

The focus of all these projects is to compare the transformation of similar cultural traditions in different environments. In the Russian study, both the Old Believers and

Top: Professor Margarita Mazo interviews members of the Molokan community in southern California. Professor Mazo was part of a scholarly exchange organized by the Russian Ministry of Culture and the Smithsonian Institution.

Bottom: Punahale Lerma, a Hawaiian hula performer, dances with a Soviet participant from the 1990 International Folklore Festival held in Kiev in the Soviet Union. Mr. Lerma participated in the Festival as part of a delegation of 25 American artists and scholars sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution.

Three women from an ensemble of Southern Russian singers are interviewed at the 1988 Festival of American Folklife. The women were part of a delegation of 35 artists from nine republics in the Soviet Union.



Photo by Jeff Tinsley, courtesy Smithsonian Institution

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Molokan communities, which share a history of opposition to the Russian Orthodox Church, have each developed differently, depending on their root traditions and their situations. Some people in the communities left Russia and migrated to Turkey, South America, and the United States. Some communities later returned to Russia. Each of the migrations has left its mark.

Their histories will provide an important backdrop to the contemporary statuses of the communities. However, the developments of the past decade, when the research teams have been observing these communities, offer perhaps the most interesting basis for comparison. The religious revival in Russia has given a respect to the Old Believers and Molokan communities which was unknown ten years ago. In the United States many people are looking away from government and to their own roots for identity and structure in an increasingly disjointed world. In the program *Russian Roots, American Branches*, audiences

will have an opportunity to observe not only the survival and adaptation of traditions, but also the influence of the changing perspectives of tradition in Russia and the United States.

Suggested Reading

Kurin, Richard. 1992. Presenting Folklife in a Soviet-American Cultural Exchange: Public Practice during Perestroika. In Robert Baron and Nicholas R. Spitzer, eds., *Public Folklore*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.

Suggested Listening

Bukhara: The Musical Crossroads of Asia. Smithsonian/Folkways 40050.

Musics of the Soviet Union. Smithsonian/Folkways 40002.

Old Believers: Songs of the Nekrasov Cossacks. Smithsonian/Folkways 40462.

Shashmaqam. Smithsonian/Folkways 40054.

Tuva: Music from the Center of Asia. Smithsonian/Folkways 40017.