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D. K. Zelenin's Compendium *Russian (East Slavonic) Ethnography: The German and Russian Editions*¹

In 1924, Max Fasmer — professor at St Petersburg University until 1914, and thereafter one of the central figures in Slavonic studies (including Russian studies) in Germany — approached D. K. Zelenin with a request for the latter to write a compendium on the ethnography of the Eastern Slavs, which was to be published in the series, *Studien über Slavische Philologie und Kulturgeschichte*.

Max Fasmer had long been a friend and admirer of D. K. Zelenin. They had been colleagues at St Petersburg University from 1909, and after 1918, when Fasmer was teaching at Tartu, and later in Leipzig and Berlin, he had maintained his long-standing contacts with Russian scholars. As I have already noted [Chistov 1991], he was elected a corresponding member of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1928, and from 1925 he and R. Trautman were editors of the German series *Studien über Slavische Philologie und Kulturgeschichte* and *Zeitschrift für slavische Philologie*, one of the premier Slavonic journals in Europe. In Russia he was known not only for a number of generalising works on Eastern European ethnography (for instance, *Beiträge*

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¹ The author did not respond to the invitation to review the translation of this contribution. [Editor].

zur historischen Völkerkunde Osteuropas, but also for his impressive expertise in Russian ethnography and folklore. More recently, Fasmer has been best known for his four-volume etymological dictionary of the language [Fasmer 1964–73], translated into Russian by O. N. Trubachev, who also added valuable supplementary material of his own [see also Trubachev 1960; 1972].

D. K. Zelenin was warmly responsive to Max Fasmer's suggestion that he write such an introduction. After obtaining permission from the relevant authority (as was essential at the time) — in this case, the Scientific Directorate of the Ukrainian Socialist Republic, since he was then professor at the University of Kharkov — he drafted the piece and had it translated into German. In 1927, the introduction was published as *Russische (Ostslavische) Volkskunde*.

The value of D. K. Zelenin's book went considerably beyond its usefulness to Western readers. It also had epoch-making significance in the development of Russian ethnography. It would have been logical for it to be translated into Russian straight away. However, this did not happen. Why should such an important, topical piece of work have had to wait until 1991 to be published in Russian?

I attempted to answer this question in the essay mentioned earlier [Chistov 1991], which was published in the first edition of Zelenin's *Russische (Ostslavische) Volkskunde* after this eventually appeared in a Russian translation by K. D. Tsvina undertaken at my suggestion [Zelenin 1991]. However, I would now see the explanations I then gave as rather one-sided. The explanation for this lay, I think, in a reluctance to publish, or perhaps more accurately, a sense that it was improper to publish, a valuable work like this without detailed contemporary commentaries. Readers should also be made aware of the vicious criticism to which the 1927 edition of Zelenin's work was subjected in 1937 and successive years. This constituted a belated reaction to the 1927 edition, now under assault because of an expectation that a Russian translation of it would soon appear. Zelenin himself replied to the attacks in his article, 'A Response to my Critics' [Zelenin 1938].

To understand what was going on, one needs to bear in mind the general situation in those years,¹ and the manner and language then employed in intellectual debates, as espoused also by Zelenin's critics. As a matter of fact, Zelenin's own 'Response to my Critics' [Zelenin 1938] also started off by marshalling various stereotypes of the time.² Zelenin cited two of his own articles, published in

¹ I.e. the years of the Great Purges, when 'criticism' essentially consisted of public denunciations of literary and scholarly works, often as a prelude to the arrest of the person under attack. [Editor].

² Zelenin had of course no choice but to resort to the language used by his critics.

Sovetskaya etnografiya in 1932, and devoted to a survey of Western European work on Slavonic culture, where he had written, 'We think it is already clear to our readers that almost all the works analysed here have a deeply bourgeois character and are not only unacceptable to us in terms of their methodology, but also often directly hostile to the Soviet Union; many authors of these so-called 'scholarly works' are in fact émigrés from our country. However, it is not only our enemies abroad who are active in the field of Slavonic studies, but also our friends, whose interest in the past of the Soviet population is driven by their admiration for the wonderful achievements of socialist construction in the USSR, and their recognition that the capitalist world should pay due attention to these. Aid to such scholars — our friends — in their study of the Slavs is a worthy concern of Soviet ethnography.' And he continues: 'Our general conclusion, based on a detailed survey of all these materials, is that the whole of Western European Slavonic studies employs obsolete methodologies and circulates round and round a series of worn-out themes, whose relevance to the present day is extremely questionable' [Zelenin 1938: 143]. At the same time, Zelenin did single out some non-Soviet works on Slavonic studies, for example, those by the famous Czech Slavist Lubor Niederle [Niederle 1925] and others, but emphasised that these had 'empirical' rather than 'methodological' or 'political' significance.

Notwithstanding Zelenin's extremely cautious formulation of his arguments — with one eye always turned to his hostile critics, as it were — he at the same time did contrive to impart a good deal of information about the activities of these critics and the nature of their attacks in the high-Stalinist tooth-and-nail mode. Thus, in the journal, *The Marxist Historian*, and particularly in the essay 'On the Methods of the Wreckers¹ in Archaeology and Ethnography', one can read phrases such as 'the abject kow-towing to foreign chauvinist "scholarship" in Zelenin's "report" published in *Sovetskaya etnografiya*.' Zelenin, in defending himself against these attacks, openly named them as 'slandorous', and added, 'The appearance of material of this kind on the pages of a scholarly journal has to be described as extraordinary.'

There was more to this than simply a difference of opinion. Zelenin's critics genuinely did resort to lies and slander. Thus, in the article in *The Marxist Historian* just cited, Zelenin is accused of 'trying with one hand to force ethnography out of existence'² and with the other

¹ 'Wrecker' was a standard Stalinist slur, originally applied to supposed saboteurs in factories, but also employed for anyone allegedly hostile to the work of 'socialist construction' in the intellectual or political field. [Editor].

² The word used in the original is 'liquidate', which has sinister connotations of political repression. [Editor].

to create ‘the right conditions for the appearance of anti-Marxist “works of ethnographical scholarship” of a typically bourgeois kind’. And at this point ‘Zelenin’s racist book published in Germany’ is mentioned [Artsikhovskiy-Kiselev 1937: 82]. Zelenin himself had no doubt that this referred to *Russische (Ostslavische) Volkskunde*, the commission for which had, as mentioned above, been accepted by him in 1923 with the permission of the Scientific Directorate of the Ukrainian Socialist Republic. He also wrote that, had he refused, the commission would have been offered to ‘some Russian émigré from the White Guard’. Elsewhere he cited a favourable review from ‘the most eminent of Russian ethnographers, the late Vera Kharuzina’, and a review in *Kraevedenie* [Local History] under the resonant title ‘An Epoch-Making Book’ [*Kraevedenie* 1927: 447–50]. Among those who had unfairly poured scorn on him, Zelenin names in particular S. P. Tolstov. The latter accused Zelenin of having denied the ‘Finnish origins’ of the Russian people, and of insisting on the affinities of the Russians, the Ukrainians, and the Belorussians. Tolstov was not, of course, raising a debate on the Finnish versus Slavonic ethnic characteristics of the Russians, but on the issue of the extent to which the Finno-Ugric peoples had shaped Russian ‘ethnogenesis’ [the development of Russian culture] (a problem that had been discussed in the historical studies of M. N. Pokrovskiy and his followers).

Naturally, once *Russische (Ostslavische) Volkskunde* had been subjected to attacks of this kind, a Russian edition was quite unthinkable. At the same time, it is clear from documents in Zelenin’s personal archive that he still maintained hope of such an edition, at least until the late 1940s.

Obviously, attacks of this kind effectively ruled out the publication of generalising works on Russian ethnography during the Stalin era. In this connection, one should mention that the German edition *Russische (Ostslavische) Volkskunde* essentially drew a line under Russian culture from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries in its historical development. At this point, the strong traditions of a still overwhelmingly rural culture were still in force. Zelenin’s book did not deal with the contemporary situation of the 1920s and the 1930s. But that did not prevent this book, published in 1927, from being subjected in the 1930s not to criticism in the ordinary sense, or measured assessments of its value, but to vilification and denunciation. This process is commemorated in Zelenin’s dignified ‘Response to My Critics’, in which he notes the bogus and time-serving nature of the sudden wave of attacks in 1938, more than a decade after the book was published (by S. P. Tolstov, N. M. Matorin, and others). He also cites a sharply negative and equally bogus review of two of his other books — *Kult ongonov v Sibiri* [The

Cultic Practices of the Siberian Ongoni] and *Totemy — derevyia v skazaniyakh i obryadakh evropeiskikh narodov* [Totem Trees in the Tales and Rituals of the Peoples of Europe]. ‘One must express surprise and concern that even after the work of wreckers in the publishing house attached to the Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography, this house apparently deemed it appropriate to publish no less than three [sic.] fat books by Zelenin, in which the author sees fit to foist on the reader his anti-Marxist notions about the origins of religion’ [*Sovetskaya etnografiya* 1938: 82]. Zelenin was left to observe that he had not in fact published three books, and that his book on totem trees did not contain any material on the origins of religion.

But I have already cited enough from Tolstov and others to give readers a sense of the dominant intellectual traditions of the Stalin era, and to make clear why Zelenin abandoned the idea of writing something akin to the work he had published in German, while still remaining attached to the fond hope that some day producing such a work might be possible.

However, one should also bear methodological issues in mind. Zelenin's 1927 work was a study of Russian ethnography up to and including the early twentieth century, an era at which Russian ethnographers and folklorists had a strong grasp of the necessary methods of collection, description, and analysis of their material. But in the 1920s and 1930s, the understanding of ethnography and of its relations with other academic disciplines, and its place and role relative to these, was in flux. At national ethnographical conferences in 1932 and 1934, there were still voices heard in favour of turning ethnography into no more than a sub-branch of archaeology, rather than a separate discipline. From this point of view also, the effort to write a generalising work on the history of ethnography and about ethnography in the old meaning of the term would not have been timely. Later — from the 1960s onwards — the intellectual thrust of ethnography shifted again, and the contours of the discipline altered to become those still evident today. But that is another story.

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