

Odetā Rudling, *Von der nationalen Form zum nationalen Inhalt. Litauische Folklore zwischen Sowjetisierung und Nationsbildung (1940–1990)*, series Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte, Vol. 89, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2023. 390 pp. ISBN 978-3447-120-49-4

Odetā Rudling has written a coherent, comprehensive and very interesting book about folklore in the Lithuanian SSR from 1940 to 1990. It aims to support the thesis that Sovietisation accelerated Lithuanian nation-building, by mobilising the masses in line with the national idea. It suggests that in prewar Lithuania, when the independent state existed, the national idea only reached part of society. When Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union, it introduced its own ethnophile policies, which led to the development and popularisation of folklore, making the national idea in the Lithuanian SSR a mass phenomenon, and thus completing the nation-building process, in accordance with Miroslav Hroch's three-stage theory of nation formation. It further suggests that this laid the foundations for Lithuania's declaration of independence in 1990. The book aims to highlight the Soviet Union's internal paradox, where Sovietisation ultimately led to the collapse of the state: folklore was in the foreground of the struggle for independence, and was a reason for the state's disintegration (pp. 281–282).

To substantiate this, the book focuses on an analysis of folklore as a phenomenon in the Lithuanian SSR. It is organised partly chronologically and partly thematically, covering all the decades of Soviet Lithuania, and highlighting the most prominent trends in each period relating to the folklore phenomenon: the creation of folk ensembles, the development of stylised and Sovietised folklore during the Stalin era, the criticism of pseudo-folklore, efforts to 'cosmicise' folklore, the crisis in mass amateur art, the creation of new folklorised peoples' traditions, ethnographic tourism, and the turn towards 'authentic' folklore in later decades. It also discusses the importance of folklore in the 'Singing Revolution' of the late 1980s, as well as the situation of folklore after Lithuania declared independence in 1990.

The book focuses on the manifestation of folklore in the Lithuanian SSR, while also revealing the broader Soviet context that influenced

various aspects and directions in the development of folklore in the republic. Folklore is analysed as a phenomenon shaped by the Soviet state. In addition, the book examines individual figures, giving short biographies, who significantly impacted specific manifestations and forms of folklore. Special attention is given, for instance, to the life of the folk ensemble leader Jonas Švedas, as well as to the ensemble itself, and its highs and lows. The analysis concentrates primarily on musical activities (songs, dances) and does not address visual aspects, such as the use of folklore elements in interior design, household details, decoration, and other everyday needs.

Folklore is discussed as a heterogeneous phenomenon that remained 'in vogue' throughout the existence of Soviet Lithuania. When certain forms of folklore became unpopular, they were replaced by others. During the Stalin era, Sovietised folklore, including songs and dances, was created, and mass amateur art activities were organised. However, during 'The Thaw', the popularity of this type of folklore declined, and mass amateur art reduced, giving rise to ethnographic tourism. In this context, people visited villages to collect or become acquainted with folkloric material. As ethnographic tourism was politically restricted and suppressed, a related movement towards authentic folklore emerged, putting country people on the stage. The movement remained popular until the 'Singing Revolution', during which it coexisted with the surviving Sovietised folklore. The chosen overarching theme of 'folklore' allows for the inclusion of diverse representations, offering a colourful but cohesive portrayal of the most prominent cultural phenomena across different decades.

The book is highly detailed and uses a wide range of sources, including significant contributions from reflections, the memoirs of folklore enthusiasts from that time, and the recollections of other participants. This reveals fascinating aspects of folklore as a phenomenon, offering an insight into its dynamics and its development from within. Reading the book, one can truly sense the vibrant, pulsating life of folklore. It will undoubtedly serve as a foundational reference, not only for discussions about Soviet Lithuania, but also about Soviet folklore in general.

The book leaves several points unclear, primarily concerning its main thesis that Sovietisation also entailed nation-building. First, the nature and the extent of the spread of folklore remain unclear. The study presents folklore as omnipresent and thoroughly integrated into societal activities. The author does not view the widespread presence of folklore merely as a 'banal' phenomenon, in the sense of Michael Billig's

concept of banal nationalism. Instead, it was practised in a highly visible and active form, engaging people deeply. The question of how actively people were involved is addressed with the figures cited: combining participants in mass amateur art activities, the folklore movement and ethnographic tourism, there were around a million people by the 1970s, about a third of the population of the Lithuanian SSR (pp. 280–281, 343). These figures indeed suggest a significant level of national mobilisation.

They also raise questions. If they are based solely on official Soviet statistics, it is important to note that such statistics often reflected expectations rather than the actual situation. The political goal was to declare as broad a public involvement in amateur art activities as possible, which may have led to inflated figures. The number of ensembles could also have been exaggerated. The organisers could have reported groups that were formed for only a short time as separate ensembles, and the same participants could have been counted as part of different ensembles and activities. There may be many discrepancies in the statistics.

The second question is whether everything attributed to folklore in the statistics can indeed be considered folklore. What was the actual place of folklore or related phenomena in the overall culture of the Lithuanian SSR? The author claims that ‘... the Communist Party had propagated folklore as the essence of the national culture for around 50 years, and it was accepted as such by the Lithuanian population’ (p. 281).

The book seems to suggest that folklore was omnipresent. However, not everything in mass amateur art, which created the foundations for mobilisation into the Song Festivals, can be associated with folklore. In the later Song Festivals, not only did wooden flute orchestras perform, but also symphony orchestras; not only were folk dances featured but also ballroom dancing. Brass bands, including military ones, also participated, along with other types of ensemble. All of this was included in amateur art. Therefore, not all amateur art can be connected with folklore, so the portion of culture associated with folklore might be quite limited.

Moreover, during the late Soviet period, choral repertoires increasingly included popular Soviet songs. Even when stylised, folklore comprised only a part of the Song Festival repertoire, which had a significant influence on the overall amateur art repertoire.

The impact of Soviet modernisation on folklore is linked in the book to the relatively short-lived efforts to ‘cosmicise’ folklore. However, it does not explore in depth how the Soviet state’s ambition to create its own alternative popular culture to the Western one in the 1960s placed folklore within the broader cultural context. Perhaps a small portion of

this pop culture (new popular music songs) could partly be linked to folklore, but even in that case, we would need to greatly expand the definition of folklore.

During the 'Singing Revolution', the author mentions the influence of rock marches, but seems to place them on the same level as folklore events. However, could it be that rock music had a greater influence on youth and the mood in the 'singing' public sphere of that time than folklore did. The same goes for other phenomena. They may have had some folkloric elements, but can they really be classified as folklore?

Thirdly, are the Soviet political context and the influence of Sovietisation on society not underestimated in the book? The book analyses a significant amount of security service material, which adds some valuable aspects to the research. However, there is little analysis of the folklore mobilisation mechanism that the Party created and implemented, including political measures to promote mass amateur art, administrative efforts and personnel training. The coercive side of administrative mechanisms run by the Party and the propaganda tools remain outside the main focus of the book's investigation.

A major strength of the book lies in its portrayal of folklore and its movement 'from within', based on the attitudes and perspectives of folklore enthusiasts, or at least those who worked in the field and were among the most active participants. This indeed provides a solid foundation for one of the author's likely assertions: that society itself actively engaged in the folklore movement, with the Soviet state merely providing the opportunities for folklore enthusiasts to develop it, opportunities they took advantage of by becoming deeply involved (p. 65). This may create the impression that the folklore movement emerged from the grassroots. For instance, one exemplary song and dance ensemble was established under the leadership of Jonas Švedas, and later others seemed to eagerly follow suit (p. 98). Having been tasked with creating a certain type of Soviet-national musical production, composers seem to freely discuss what that production should be, voluntarily striving to implement the tasks set by the Party (pp. 90–92).

It gives the impression that the public was ignited by the Communist Party opening up opportunities for involvement in the folklore movement through funding and encouragement (p. 99). This argument suggests that it was impossible to force people politically to engage in amateur art activities in their free time.

Although the book mentions a certain state-imposed direction and intervention, it does not change the overall depiction of folklore as

'spontaneous' and supported 'from below'. Under Stalin's regime, such an idyllic portrayal raises many doubts. Considering that organising Song Festivals and amateur art involved not only funding and incentives, but also an administrative mechanism supported by penalties, plans and supervision, imposed by various levels of executive authority to ensure compliance, the idea of the development of folklore as entirely grassroots is questionable.

The portrayal of the folklore movement as emerging 'from below' is also clouded by the decline in amateur art activities, particularly those related to folklore during 'The Thaw' (p. 156), when people had more freedom to choose.

Fourthly, the author's main thesis, that Sovietisation entailed a form of nation-building that the Lithuanian nation had not previously experienced, also raises questions. This thesis is linked to the idea that only during the Soviet era did the national idea reach the masses. The author engages in a significant and broad discussion about what happened to nations during the Soviet period: whether they were created or destroyed. The author takes the former position. Does this apply specifically to the Lithuanian nation, however?

Can any form of folklore be attributed to the phenomenon of nation-building? And is that where it leads? The author does not define the boundaries between forms of nationalism that lead to nation-building and those that do not (p. 22). How is 'nation-building' understood? Is it considered as a political nation pursuing very specific goals, according to the definition, or as a sense of national belonging or identity, which may not necessarily be reflected upon? The book's material itself indicates that various groups used elements of nationalism for very different purposes. Some examples: the first secretary Antanas Sniečkus aimed to consolidate the society of the Lithuanian SSR by strengthening his position with Moscow; some prewar folklore enthusiasts wanted to continue their work; youths joined ethnographic expeditions seeking self-realisation and resisting rapid modernisation; and dissidents pursued political goals. Thus, while there were many elements of nationalism, it is not possible to speak of a cohesive national vision.

The author is correct in saying that folklore was not used politically to strengthen mass nationalism in independent interwar Lithuania. However, mass nationalism was bolstered by other factors and phenomena. An example is one of the largest national political mobilisation projects: the commemoration of the anniversary of the death of Grand Duke Vytautas the Great in 1930, which involved entire cities and towns.

Interwar Lithuania was a multi-ethnic state, so mobilising the nation on the basis of folklore alone would probably have been unsuccessful.

The Lithuanian SSR was not an independent political entity: at best, it was administrative. The state was the Soviet Union. Therefore, what was mobilised in the Lithuanian SSR during the Soviet era was a particular ethnic group. The political community, if it existed at all, was Soviet. From the information the author presents, it can be concluded that in the case of the Lithuanian SSR, we are talking not so much about the creation of a nation, but rather about adapting and incorporating a pre-Soviet nation into Soviet life, using national sentiments as a tool. The pre-Soviet nation was transformed into an ethnic group without a national political identity. Therefore, what occurred during the Soviet era might be better described as a process of 'nation-reduction' rather than 'nation-building'.

The value of the book lies not only in its thorough investigation, but also in its ability to provoke important questions. Rudling's book is precisely that kind of work.

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