

Amato, Anthony J. *The Stark Carpathians: Ritual, Text, and Authority among Ukraine's Hutsuls*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024. Illustrations. Maps. Notes. Bibliography Index. xxvii+477 pp. \$150 (cloth) ISBN 978-1-793 6-0838-3.

With his second highly original book on the Hutsuls and their region, Anthony J. Amato is proving himself to be the most impressive American scholar of the subject. He already has authored a major work of environmental and economic history on the Hutsul region, *The Carpathians, the Hutsuls, and Ukraine: An Environmental History* (Lexington Books, 2021). These two hefty and learned volumes shed a penetrating light on the vagaries of the region as a physical and economic space and on the lifeworlds and dogged agency of the fascinating highland population of the Eastern Carpathians (today in Ukraine) known as the Hutsuls. The Hutsuls were for centuries a remote and relatively isolated pastoral and equestrian peasant folk dwelling in the frontier region that was the mountains, speaking an East Slavic dialect related to Ukrainian and professing the Greek Catholic faith. They also have a rich, compelling, if at times gruesome and raunchy, folklore. According to Amato, the Hutsul region, and not Transylvania, should be credited with supplying the vampires on which Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was based.

Amato's work has been informed by his profound contact with the region and its people, already visible in his 1998 dissertation "In the Wild Mountains: Idiom, Economy, and Ideology among the Hutsuls, 1848 to 1939," which was based on fieldwork in seven Hutsul villages: Dora, Holovy, Hryniava, Kosmach, Krasnoilia, Kryvorivnia, and Sheshory. Instead of publishing that in lightly revised form, the author appears to have used what he learned, plus much additional reading and research, to write these two very different books. This one in particular gives evidence of a very close reading of his sources, be they archival or from the extant secondary literature, in at least seven languages and the Hutsul dialect. He also proves well read in the relevant anthropological literature. The notes amount to a hundred pages, suggesting—rightly—the learned nature of the book.

The book's title encapsulates its focus well. It is a study of Hutsul "culture as it was manifested in rituals and texts" in the period 1848 to 1939—that is, the period beginning with peasant emancipation under Habsburg rule through the interwar years under Polish rule (xiii). Not easy to pigeonhole, the book is a work of ethnography, anthropology, history, and popular culture. The author demythologizes the Hutsuls, claiming no particular special origins or nature for them, while still uncovering much that is novel and original. Already the introduction probes the application and use of the name "Hutsul" and the creation of the Hutsuls as an ethnographic group, as well as the highlanders' relation to the authorities near and far, be they Habsburg or Polish officialdom, Greek Catholic clergy, or other non-Hutsuls.

The first two chapters introduce the book's thesis, the Hutsuls, and the region. Chapter 1 provides information on the range of sources utilized in *The Stark Carpathians* while highlighting the interplay of text and ritual to come.

Chapter 2 is a tour-de-force review of the history of the highland environment in which the Hutsuls functioned. A veritable summary of Amato's previous book of environmental history, the chapter could stand on its own for use in an environmental history course.

With intriguingly cryptic and clever titles and penetrating, often unsettling, observations, the next thirteen substantive chapters shed light on various aspects of unexpurgated Hutsul life with all its rough and racy edges. The author takes an intertextual approach to the complexity of Hutsul texts and rituals, which he sets in context. Despite their relative isolation, as this book amply demonstrates, the Hutsuls were not so isolated as to lack contact with texts, that is, with the printed as well as spoken word. The former could come in the form of terse state documents, almanacs, scientific works, ethnographic studies, belles-lettres, and newspaper and travel accounts. These texts, together with Hutsul rituals, were creatively reconfigured or plumbed for new meanings by the Hutsuls, in a number of instances not in keeping with the purported purpose of a given text.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the Greek Catholic clergy who ministered to the Hutsuls. The first of these, "Bisons and Lutherans," focuses on the priests and their leanings, including the Russophiles (the titular "bisons"), and how the Hutsuls saw them. Chapter 4, "Pagans and Calvins," presents the seemingly less-than-orthodox beliefs of the lightly churched Hutsuls as well as their relations with the authority that was the clergy.

Chapter 5, "Not in Our Club," interestingly investigates peasant literacy. Amato debunks the myth that all Hutsuls were illiterate (literacy rates were rising), while also explaining what the challenges were—and how Hutsuls variously interpreted what they read. Also based on Hutsul readings, "Astrology and Folkhealing" as well as hydrotherapy—which became all the rage among tourists in the region—are the subject of chapter 6. Chapter 7, "Peasants, Priests, and the Plow" shows how conflicting messages about land cultivation were conveyed by Greek Catholic clergy to the Hutsuls, traditionally a pastoral people.

The next three chapters deal with various aspects of Hutsul political life. Chapter 8, "Marching in the Hollows," sheds light on internal village politics and shows how highlanders joined clubs and political organizations—the most noteworthy of these being the radical gymnastics and firefighting organization known as Sich. Dealing with the language of politics, "Don't Cry, Satan" analyzes the Švejk-like stereotype of the "stupid Hutsul," used by the highlanders to their advantage, as well as one of the most striking historical aspects of highland life, brigandry, which nineteenth-century Hutsuls came to romanticize as the quintessence of freedom. Chapter 10, "Cossacks and Heretics," engages with various Hutsul narratives and considers how Hutsuls ultimately came to embrace the Cossack heritage.

The final five substantive chapters provide insight into various aspects of Hutsul rituals and culture and the controversies surrounding them during this period. "Vampire Collusion and the Ungrateful Dead" covers how Hutsuls dealt with vampires and witches in their midst. A thoughtful chapter 12 considers the relationship between the titular "Belief and Superstition." Chapter 13, "Godless

Carols,” is a penetrating study of the Hutsul tradition of caroling from house to house at Christmastime. Chapter 14, “Playing Dead,” examines the seemingly frivolous games traditionally played at wakes. And “It’s All Over but the Splashing” deftly deals with the gendered and generational uses and abuses of water on “Drenched” or “Wet” Easter Monday.

A succinct yet insightful conclusion ties the threads together. In sum, Hutsuls are shown to be the ultimate producers of their own Hutsul-ness. This identity can appear inconsistent or off-putting to readers and observers. In any case, it stood apart from the stereotypes or mythologized versions of Hutsuls propagated by outsiders. That said, Hutsuls did not create Hutsul-ness in a vacuum but rather interacted with ethnographic and other texts about them. Hutsul-ness increasingly became performative.

The Stark Carpathians is a thorough and thought-provoking analysis of Hutsul lifeworlds. It should be noted that, in keeping with his field research, Amato focuses mainly on the experience of Hutsuls living within Austrian Galicia and the Second Polish Republic, not their brethren in Hungary/Czechoslovakia/Transcarpathia or Bukovyna/Romania. However, he does occasionally refer to texts that touch upon those regions. The reader interested in Hutsuls, ethnography, or popular culture will be amply rewarded. This reviewer’s one major beef is with Lexington Books: the binding is poorly done, resulting in the occasional loose page on first turn. The book deserves better.

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