

REVIEW¹

OF E. V. ASTAKHOVA'S MONOGRAPH

SPAIN AS A METAPHOR

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At the beginning of the 17th century, Miguel Cervantes sent Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, the heroes of his immortal novel, around Spain. The travellers left us an unforgettable picture of the life of Spaniards at the time and what medieval Spain looked like. Now, 400 years later, the famous Russian historian and educator Elena Astakhova, an expert in Pyrenean culture and Romance languages, a tireless researcher, political scientist, and artist par excellence, dared to follow in the footsteps of the two celebrated Spanish wanderers to create a collection of ten images representing the unique and multifaceted mises en scènes of the Spain of today and tomorrow.

“This book is about my Spain, one of many,” Astakhova says in the preface to the book. This candid confession gives the book – simultaneously a work of art, scientific study, cultural essay, and philosophical reflection – a wholly personal touch, full of the author’s impressions, internal associations, and emotional assessments. As Astakhova sees it, the metaphorical nature of Spain gives us an insight into the meanings of many words, reveals the hidden essence of phenomena, uncovers implications, helps us unravel some of the country’s secrets beyond the Pyrenees, and provides a glimpse into the author’s understanding of the national and cultural worldview of the Spanish people.

At the same time, in the context of Astakhova’s monograph, another conceptual approach to the concept of metaphor championed by the author acquires special significance. This approach goes back to the ideas of Aristotle, who believed that turning

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to metaphor involves comparing subjects and phenomena based on their commonality or similarity. In this regard, it is not at all surprising that the second actor in the monograph *Spain as a Metaphor* is Russia, which stands on an equal footing with the eponymous country. The author comes to the convincing conclusion that it would be impossible to talk about Spanish identity without reference to similar and different manifestations of comparable things and objects in the Russian worldview.

It seems logical for the purposes of the work we are reviewing that the author begins her Iberian journey with the image of Spain exactly as it is seen in Russia. The stories that make up this image include the border cultures, the so-called Spanish Black Legend, a look at romantic Spain, the national character of the Spaniards, Spain as an Essence, the famous Spanish *duende*. The author's attention is drawn to the image of Spain that was formed among Russian travellers, as well as to Russian stereotypes about Spain. These and other themes are presented by the author vividly and with unflinching literary skill.

We heap the same praise on Astakhova's description of the image of Russia from the Spanish point of view, which includes numerous "background" sketches such as analogues of the Black Legend and the influence of the Spanish media on public opinion, as well as questions that the author poses to herself of the like of "Is dialogue possible or not?"

The next stop on Astakhova's journey along the roads of Spain is at Spanish chromaticism, a novella that has an undeniable personal significance for the author, a subtle artist who has long been passionate about painting. Astakhova emphasizes that "... painting is characterized by the intellectual search for a spiritual path and the path of national development." A separate section is devoted to the use of colour names in Spanish proverbs and sayings.

The respect that Elena Astakhova commands in the Russian arts community is evidenced by the fact that the Museum of Russian Impressionism invited her to give a series of lectures during the "Impressionism and Spanish Art" exhibition (October 2019 – January 2020).

In the chapter entitled "The Colour of Spain," colour is seen as a symbol: parallels are drawn between colour and social and historical experience; colour and cities; and colour and the transformation of meanings. This reminds me of the survey that Astakhova conducted several years ago among her colleagues – instructors in the Department of Spanish Language at MGIMO – when she asked "What colour is Spain?" Surprisingly, almost everyone said either red or yellow. I remember that Astakhova was not happy with the results, as she had a different answer in mind, which we only learned after reading her monograph. However, it seems that the definition of the colour of a country is associated with the subjective ideas of respondents.

As we see it, the topic of colour schemes in Spanish proverbs introduced by the author is of particular importance for linguists working in Spanish and Russian. This is by no means accidental, given Astakhova's long and storied academic career as a teacher of socio-political translation, diplomacy, and Spanish and Latin American studies.

But Astakhova did not limit herself to these topics, exploring a more specific issue, namely the two colours that are traditionally associated with Spain in the historical and cultural context. Readers learn about “Black Spain,” about the “two colours” that have determined Spain’s course, and about the eternal Spanish dualism. The author’s comparative analysis of the creative heritage left by two famous Spanish artists of the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century – Ignacio Zuloaga and Joaquín Sorolla – is particularly impressive. Examining the work of the two masters, Astakhova once again asks a question that she herself answers: *Costumbrismo or tremendismo?*

Various colour illustrations serve to help the reader understand the author’s thoughts and accept the conclusions she makes, adding a more tangible and persuasive element to the author’s narrative points.

But let’s continue our pilgrimage through the cities and villages of Spain, with Elena Astakhova as our guide, and stop at another thematic space – a holiday, which is an iconic and even magical concept of the Spanish national and cultural worldview. During this virtual tour, our experienced guide introduces us to the history of Spanish theatre, rich in cultural events that had fateful significance for the country. The traditions of bullfighting are afforded a special place in the book, invariably evoking vivid and often ambiguous impressions among Russian travellers. The part of the monograph about folk and religious holidays, which are numerous in Spain, deserves special mention, as anyone who has had the opportunity to witness these events with their own eyes has invariably been mesmerized by them.

And, of course, the *mises en scènes* dedicated to the culture of the coffee ceremony, socialization, feasts, *tertulias*, and *botellon* are of undoubted interest. The Spanish love affair with coffee has so permeated the *modus vivendi* of the Spanish people, and political scientists even refer to the concept of coffee with incredible frequency in political discourse. The following, for example, is an assessment of an Ibero-American summit given by a Spanish political scientist: *la cúspide que se celebró en San José fue una reunión descafeinada* – “the Summit, which took place in San Jose, was colourless [lit. ‘decaffeinated’] and no important decisions were made.”

Elena Astakhova could not help but devote several pages of her monograph to the phenomenon of wine in its various nuances and manifestations and the importance of the drink in the everyday life of Spanish people: the culture of wine in the words of Spanish writers and philosophers; the centuries-old traditions of wine festivals in social life and in the home; the history of winemaking in Spain; and the varieties of Spanish wines and their designations.

As the author sees it, any conversation about Spain is incomplete without mention of its bar culture, a factor that strengthens ties between people. In the monograph, Astakhova dwells on the quintessential Spanish phenomenon of *movida*, or *marcha*, which became an important element of the national idiosyncrasy of the Spaniards in the post-Franco years.

In a separate passage, the author provides some interesting insights into speech *piropos*, at one time a unique means of linguistic communication and part of the Spanish folk culture. Astakhova gives numerous examples of *piropos* with impeccable translations into Russian that open up a part of the Spanish language and culture that had previously been unknown to native Russian speakers. The narrative is accompanied by comprehensive historical, cultural, and linguistic comments from the author.

The chapter entitled “*Homo Ludens*” (“The Playing Man”) is dedicated to the so-called *gregerías*, short aphoristic phrases that make up a special genre of comedy that teeters on the brink of paradox, melancholy and absurdity, created by the brilliant Spanish writer Ramón Gómez de la Serna. While reading this chapter, you can’t help but feel that the author is, and not without reason, particularly fond of the quintessence of *gregerías* – their typology, their structure, their hidden meanings

The parts of the monograph that talk about the social portrait of Spain are particularly important. In this regard, Astakhova even offers recommendations for successful communication between Russians and Spaniards. It would be extremely useful for teachers and students of Spanish to learn the intricacies of spoken Spanish and the unique Spanish humour.

And it is here that Astakhova concludes her journey through Spain, a country that is truly amazing in its diversity. Readers of *Spain as a Metaphor* will surely be left with a pleasant intellectual aftertaste and a desire to delve deeper into other features of the Spanish worldview. Elena Astakhova’s book is a milestone in humanitarian cooperation between Spain and Russia, whose peoples have always felt a mutual attraction to one another.

P.S. I can’t help but note that fact that the monograph was published simultaneously in two languages (in this case Russian and Spanish) – something that is extremely rare in the publishing world.

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