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Marc L. Greenberg

Marc Stegherr
Das Russinische
Kulturhistorische und soziolinguistische Aspekte

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(Slavistische Beiträge, Band 417)

A perennial problem of the study of languages is that those without an army and a navy tend to be overlooked. Students of Slavic languages are generally at least peripherally aware of languages like Macedonian and Slovene, each spoken by about 2 million people; but the Rusyn language, spoken by nearly as many people, persistently remains off the radar screen. To increase the cognitive challenge, the Rusyn language territory straddles the division between the former empires – Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, on the one hand and Ukraine on the other – and also in significant diaspora communities in the US and Canada; it is referred to by a number of different in-group and out-group names; and it defies easy categorization into West vs. East Slavic. In this substantive handbook, Marc Stegherr treats the social and geopolitical context of the language, its history, attempts at standardization, political endeavors to maintain and promote the language, the current socio-linguistic situation; he also provides authentic sample parallel texts, timelines of the events connected with the development and standardization of the varieties of Rusyn, and some basic facts about the grammatical structure of the language varieties themselves. In addition to a rich, nearly 30-page bibliography, the volume contains twenty greyscale illustrations, including photographs of publications in the language with their many varieties of orthography. The thorough bibliography in itself is a significant scholarly tool in its own right because it provides a systematic listing of works that tend to elude the mainstream bibliographical and abstracting services that are most readily available in the digital age.

A strength of the work is that the author seems equally adept at both historical (qua historian) and linguistic exposition (qua philologist, sociolinguist), including the employment of a kind of stylistic code-switching in each of the authorial roles. When discussing controversies on the origins of Rusyn, for example, the text is provided with rich and substantive footnotes. Linguistic explanations give pains-

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taking attention to detail and include essential illustrations of the phenomena under discussion. As a linguist/philologist myself, I found the historical sections somewhat discomfoting to read. For example, in section III. Die Geschichte des russinischen Volkes (pp. 37-107), almost every page contains footnotes that are longer than the text itself, both in terms of real-estate (the space taken up by the footnote is > 50% of the page) and linear space (the footnotes are in petit font and without significant whitespace between lines). Much of the text of the footnotes is devoted to details and commentary on the multifarious views on the origins of Rusyn and, to my mind, is therefore as relevant to the flow of the text as any other part. Why not have simply integrated the footnotes into the main text? Nevertheless, this is not a significant flaw, simply a stylistic preference – it is of course desirable to have the amount of detail that the author includes, whether it occurs in the main text or in the eyesight-challenging footnotes.

Although the authorial viewpoint is evident through statements praising progress and development (for example, he hopes for greater recognition of the Rusyn identity in a united Europe, see pp. 492-493), the main thrust of Stegherr's work is purely descriptive and, as mentioned before, highly detailed. Just as Paul Magocsi's work in English, Stegherr's work in German can help those who desire a corrective and get themselves up to speed on the essential facts of the language and the community that speaks it. The book deserves to be on the bookshelves of all dedicated Slavists, alongside other handbooks surveying the Slavic languages. It will also be appreciated by researchers studying language policy in the European Union, as well as minority identity issues, and diaspora languages in general.

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