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David L. Ransel. *Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001. viii + 314 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33825-9.

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Motherhood, Misery, and Modernity

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"What's more important to you, your son or your cow?" asked the doctors. Praskovya Korotchenkova had just brought little Mikhail to the district hospital with double pneumonia, and the doctors told her to stay at the hospital and tend him. She recalled later, "Well, I told them that I couldn't do it. My cow was just about to calve." Seeing the doctors' shocked response, she had replied, "The cow is a second mother to me; she feeds everyone." She took the child back home. After all, she explained later, "How was I going to manage without the cow? What was I going to feed the children?" (p. 186).

Praskovya and other Russian peasant mothers, and the agonizing choices they made in unbearable situations, are the subject of David Ransel's latest book. Well known as an authority on Russian family and child-care practices in the Tsarist era, Ransel has now leaped into the Soviet era. Taking full advantage of the heady atmosphere of freedom in the early 1990s, he interviewed seventy-four Russian and thirty Tatar women, whose ages then ranged from 39 to 94, about their role as mothers. Anyone who is interested in oral history, women's history, peasant history, or the effects of twentieth- century upheavals will find this book interesting.

These are women who bore the brunt of collectivization, famine, World War II, and the Soviet state's attempts to harness their productive and reproductive powers for its own purposes. Their statements paint a grim picture of the ordeals these women faced in keeping their families alive. With depressing regularity we hear of drunken and abusive husbands, frequent pregnancies, grueling field work, and infants left at home all day in soiled swaddling clothes, under the haphazard care of an older sister, with nothing for nourishment and consolation but the infamous *soska*, a dirty rag tied around a bit of chewed bread.

Against this backdrop, the choice made by Praskovya Korotchenkova, above, is not unique. Many of the women, especially in the older generations, seemed to take a callous attitude toward their sickly children, saying they would wait and see whether the children would show their toughness by surviving (p. 191). It was this seemingly heartless treatment of babies that had contributed to shocking levels of infant mortality among

Russian peasants in the pre-Revolutionary years as well. Ransel, who spent much of his career trying to explain the choices made by "mothers of misery" before the Revolution, here attempts to elucidate and put into perspective the choices made by twentieth-century peasant women.

One approach Ransel takes is comparative. A decade ago he wrote a paper contrasting pre-Revolutionary Russian child-care practices with those in the Empire's Tatar villages, where infant mortality was much lower. Ransel found studies showing that Tatar mothers kept their children much cleaner and breast-fed them for years rather than offering their newborns the germ-laden soska.[1] This contrast between Russian women and their Muslim Tatar neighbors was an evocative example of the role of religion and culture on child welfare. Ransel decided to attempt a similar comparison between Russian and Tatar child-care practices in the Soviet period. (Pre-Revolutionary Jewish mothers had also distinguished themselves by exemplary child-care practices. Ransel hoped to extend his oral history to Jewish peasant mothers as well, but virtually none remained in the Russian countryside for him to interview). His interviews showed that Tatar women continued to pride themselves on hygiene and to breastfeed for several years (pp. 203, 212).

In addition to comparing the two ethnic groups, Ransel also humanizes the Russian women by showing how their choices fit into a moral system. Praskovya Korotchenkova's cow, for example, was essential to the survival of the older children, in whom she had already invested so much care, and even to herself and her husband, without whom they might starve. The whole family's good had to take precedence over an individual baby who might not survive anyway (p. 185). As in many subsistence economies with high fertility, "village women in Russia may have been making similar calculations about investment in their infants; that is, calculations based on the apparent viability of their children" (p. 184).

Likewise, Russian mothers suppressed tears at the death of their children. Ransel makes a brilliant and evocative attempt at an anthropological explanation of this seemingly impassive attitude through the concept of "old babies." Infants deemed too sickly to survive were called "ne zhilets" ("goner") by Russians and "soft" by Tatars. Babies who shriveled up and looked old before their time were said to have "a dog's old age [*sobach'ia starost'*]. Ransel meditates on the meanings associated with the root word "old" (*star*) and concluded that it was often used "as a classification of impairment with certain sacred connotations, a category for persons who were marginal to this life and perhaps closer than ordinary folk to God" (p. 192). "Peasant women may have placed infants not expected to survive into a similar ... mental category." Mothers' attitude that "it is God's will" that a child die can be viewed as "their decision to place it nearer to God and to pass responsibility for it to a power greater than their own. This was different from neglect ... because it left open the possibility that the child could be moved from their interim space either farther toward God, in the case of its death, or back toward the living" (p. 195). Folk remedies undertaken by "wise women" could have the effect either of giving a mother hope that the child would live, leading her to invest more in caring for it, or helping her make peace with its imminent death. Ransel's analysis, though based on only one phrase, "a dog's old age," of which he cites two instances, nevertheless seems plausible and worthy of further thought. It humanizes the women and exemplifies the coexistence of different beliefs and value systems, namely a belief in both modern medicine and folk healing practices.

These are only a few of the evocative issues with which Ransel's book deals. After two introductory chapters on "Child Welfare Before the Revolution" and "Soviet Efforts to Transform Village Mothering," the book proceeds through chapters on courtship and marriage, fertility choices, childbirth, baptism and equivalent Muslim rites, coping with infant death, and caring for those children who survived. Chapters are organized either by the geographic regions of the women interviewed or by generation.

Three generations of women, as identified by Ransel, faced distinct challenges and acted on changing sets of values and priorities. The first group was the women who were born with the twentieth century and started their families soon after the 1917 Revolution. The second, those born between 1912 and 1930, came of age around the time of collectivization and started their families around the time of World War II. The third generation, born after 1930, came of age in a more stable era when the Soviet regime had finally managed to establish services such as maternity homes and child-care centers (pp. 6-7).

The first generation experienced upheavals but was nevertheless rooted in extended families; they had learned to care for children by tending their younger siblings, and they often relied on grandmothers for help and advice. Their main characteristic was "their adherence to religious norms and devotion to hard work, family and

pre-collectivization community values of mutual support and charity" (p. 237).

The second generation "felt little allegiance to anything, whether Party, government, workplace or local community" (p. 241). As collectivization and dekulakization tore apart their families and villages and forced them to work inhumanly long hours, they lost the support of their extended family. Sometimes they had to make choices on their own, going against all three authorities–fathers and husbands, religion, and the Soviet state. They felt ambivalent about some of the choices they made. For example, in their memories of the women who carried out illegal abortions, "although they could not escape the folk aversion to those who performed such procedures, the women claimed to have always and everywhere protected the identities of village abortionists, and to have done so in the face of powerful police duress and even of death" (p. 111). Most felt bitter about the unappreciated sacrifices and sufferings they had undergone. Nevertheless, not all portrayed themselves as victims. "Some women derived satisfaction from their ability to negotiate the demands of both the old world and the new, to form their own counsel and independently make the agonizing and perilous decisions that allowed them a measure of control over their lives." (p. 243).

The third generation in the 1960s-1980s enjoyed some of the benefits that the state finally provided–a lessening of collective farm work load and an increase in welfare guarantees and child care. These women had begun to view children as sources of emotional satisfaction and not just as producers (p. 232). They expressed positive memories of the late Soviet years, especially in contrast with the post-Soviet economic crises at the time of the interviews. The women still melded aspects of religious faith with a secular outlook.

Ransel's conclusion about the Tatar women is somewhat sketchier but also fascinating. Because of the smaller number of Tatar women, he could not always provide direct comparisons in each of the chapters and for each generation. However, in the end he enumerates some contrasts. As mentioned above, Tatar women prided themselves on the cleanliness and orderliness of their homes. They continued to practice the lengthy period of breast-feeding mandated by the Qur'an, and their families and villages gave them more support and some latitude in work obligations. Other distinctive traits on which the women prided themselves were the tradition of education for both boys and girls, at least in the rudiments of reading and writing, and the reciting of prayers in Arabic. In general, they had a pride in being Tatar and seemed to experience more support from family and community in their role as mothers (p. 250).

Overall, Ransel finds that the women he interviewed do not fit into the historiographic molds of either "linear progress in the modernization of mothering" that the Soviet regime tried to inculcate, nor simply of resistance to and accommodation with the regime's values. Rather, women "were selective. They eagerly incorporated changes that promised to ease their burdens, yet fiercely resisted government attempts to exploit their full potential as both workers and vessels of reproduction. They retained fundamental religious beliefs and practices as well as control over decisions about their children's physical and spiritual health, despite government attempts to usurp these sites of authority. The women placed their ultimate reliance on one another and on their religious faith. They were able to merge the old and the new, to mediate between the needs of their families and the demands of the workplace, to draw as needed on a combination of inherited knowledge and modern services–to survive and endure" (p. 252). This third model–neither modernizing transformation, nor resistance and accommodation, but a sort of "strategic syncretism"–resembles my own findings on interactions among clans and factions in villages of the Smolensk region in the mid-1930s.[2]

This book fills a significant gap in the history of Russian peasant women in the twentieth century. Previous literature has addressed topics such as women's role in resisting collectivization, their participation in the work of the collective farms, and the emergence of some as "activists" who glorified Stalin in labor achievements and speeches.[3] Works dealing more directly with family policy tend to deal mostly with urban women.[4] One book that remains a valuable account of Soviet policy experiments and rural family responses in another Muslim region, that of Central Asia, is Gregory Massell's *The Surrogate Proletariat* (Princeton, 1974). Ironically, some of the most vivid images of peasant women's life appear in literary works by men of the "Village Prose" movement, such as Mikhail Alekseev on the travails of the peasant daughter-in-law, and Fedor Abramov on the complex attitudes of mothers toward their children.[5]

However, the work that provides the most direct complement to Ransel's work is Barbara Alpern Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck's collection of interviews done in 1994-95, *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview,

1998). The authors of that volume, who set out to record women's experiences of the whole Soviet era, managed to interview only one woman who had remained a peasant for her whole working life. Other peasant women whom they attempted to interview "responded with monosyllables ... or took the conversation in a direction that was not useful to us" (p. 117). Some potential subjects apparently thought the interviewers were from the KGB (p. 223). This calls into question why David Ransel and his collaborators were more successful in drawing out the peasant women they interviewed. Even Ransel admitted that some women thought the interviews were compulsory, and one or two even thought they would be arrested on the basis of their answers (p. 18). Ransel's relative success may have resulted from his use of specific questions about the seemingly non-political and universal topic of motherhood. In contrast, Engel and Posadskaya identified themselves primarily as feminists and asked their subjects more generally to retell their life story.

Nevertheless, Engel and Posadskaya's volume is a valuable primary source, with long excerpts from one very enlightening interview with a peasant woman and several others with women who grew up in the countryside. Like Ransel's subjects, those women spoke of frequent and often illegal abortions, haphazard child-care, persecution by in-laws, and a sense of moral ambivalence about measures to which they had resorted in desperate times. One woman, who had stolen handfuls of grain from her workplace during the famine of the early 1930s, said she felt guilty about it for over forty years until she was able to confess to a priest (p. 131). In thinking about the value of Ransel's book for an advanced undergraduate or graduate course in Russian social history or women's or peasant history, one might consider recommending Engel and Posadskaya's book too, as a vivid illustration of what Ransel has analyzed in a more systematic way. Both Ransel and Posadskaya benefited from the magical atmosphere of the early 1990s, when "the lid was off, the fear was gone for many, and the opportunity to give voice at last to their hurts and grievances clearly appealed to many informants" (p. 18). It also became possible to travel around the Russian hinterland. Since then, no doubt, many of the women they interviewed have passed away, and their memories would have been lost.

Other scholars, too, have taken advantage of this opportunity to talk with rural people about their choices involving individual and family welfare in contemporary life. For example, anthropologist Margaret Paxson has lived for long periods in villages of the Russian north, and the sociologists David O'Brien, Larry Dershem, and Valeri Patsiorkovski carried out surveys showing how modern-day family relationships and other types of "social capital" help rural people survive current upheavals.[6]

This readable and accessible volume would suit students and researchers interested in Soviet social history as well as the history of peasants, women, and families. For undergraduates, it could serve as an opening for discussion of issues like the competing pulls of individual and family well-being and the changing role of religious values in the face of upheavals. For researchers and comparative historians, Ransel's massive bibliography is a helpful guide not only to works on the Soviet era but also to sources on pre-Revolutionary family and child-care practices; it also includes a sample of major historical and anthropological works on family life in other countries and time periods.

Notes

[1]. "Mothering, Medicine, and Infant Mortality in Russia: Some Comparisons." Occasional Paper, Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, no. 236 (1990).

[2]. "After Collectivization: Social Capital and Local Politics in Rural Western Russia, 1933-1937," conference paper. A translated version was published in Russia as "Posle kollektivizatsii: sotsial'nyi kapital I mestnaia politika v derevenskoi zapadnoi Rossii, 1933-1937 gody," in E. V. Kodin and Michael Hickey, eds., *Smolenshchina na stranitsakh amerikanskoi istoricheskoi literatury* (Smolenskii gosurdarstvennyi pedagogicheskii universitet, 2000), pp. 248-289.

[3]. Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin* (Oxford, 1996); Susan Bridger, *Women in the Soviet Countryside* (Cambridge University Press, 1987); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants* (Oxford, 1994); and Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine, eds., *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, (Princeton University Press, 2000). An excellent collection edited by Beatrice Farnsworth and Lynne Viola, *Russian Peasant Women* (Oxford, 1992) gave insight on many topics, including women's role in collective farm work, divorce, and property rights in the 1920s, and rural women's response to glasnost.

[4]. See, e.g., Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[5]. Mikhail Alekseev, "Agaf'ia, Dorofeevna I drugie,"

Khleb–Imia sushchestvitel'naia: Povest' v novellakh, in *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, v. 3 (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1988), esp. pp. 321-328; Fedor Abramov, e.g. "Materinskoe serdtse," in *Izbrannoe* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literature,1975), v. 1.

[6]. An example of Paxson's recent work is "Social Organization and the Metaphysics of Exchange in Rural Russia," Lecture at Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, Washington, D.C., Jan. 29, 2001. See <http://wwics.si.edu/kennan/reports/2001/paxson.htm$>$; David J. O'Brien, Valeri V. Patsiorkovski, Larry D. Dershem, *Household Capital and the Agrarian Problem in Russia* (Aldershot and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2000).

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