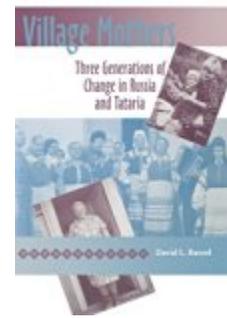


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David L. Ransel. *Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. 328 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21820-9.

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Women's Lives in Rural Russia

Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria (newly out in a paperback version), provides a broad overview of rural attitudes towards child-rearing, mothering, child-birth, and family life in Russia and Tataria. This new body of research came about when David L. Ransel arrived in Russia in the spring of 1990 prepared to work in the Russian archives and intending to extend his earlier research on infant and childhood mortality into the Soviet period.[1] When he discovered that it might now be possible to visit Russian and Tatar villages, he launched an oral history project. With the help of friends and colleagues, Ransel arranged travel to six different villages between 1990 and 1993, and interviewed one hundred Russian and Tatar women. He originally intended to include Jewish women in the study, but was unable to locate enough rural Jewish women for comparative purposes. His three interviews with Jewish women are thus used only to “reinforce or comment on more general points” (p. 1)

Ransel's study is one of the few oral histories written by a western historian of Russia.[2] While American history has seen a burgeoning cottage industry in oral history by both professional and amateur historians, western historians of Russia have been hindered until recently by travel restrictions and by a lack of training in techniques of oral history. The collaborative nature of Ransel's work undoubtedly contributed to the success of the project. He emphasizes that although he developed the project, the questionnaires, and the resulting conclusions, he relied heavily upon friends and colleagues in Russia. Three other women assisted with interviews

(Ransel conducted only about half of them himself), while other friends and acquaintances helped to provide introductions to potential interview subjects.

Ransel's study gives us a clearer picture of life in the Russian village over the past one hundred years. Although peasants and workers have been an object of study for some time now, peasant and rural women have remained largely neglected.[3] As Ransel notes, “until the 1960s, village women constituted a majority of all women in Russia. The lives of this large segment of the population have been little studied” (p. 2). Ransel's study examines the everyday lives of these rural women, marriage choices, courtship patterns, childbirth practices, etc. Additionally, Ransel's study emphasizes themes of individual experiences (vs. images of the “eternal” unchanging Russian peasant woman), interwoven with those large political and world events of the twentieth century which traditionally take precedence in a historical study. Finally, he traces the development of modern medical discourse and the processes by which it ultimately transforms the reproductive culture of the Soviet villages (p. 2).

The first section of *Village Mothers* offers a fairly traditional historical narrative with some comparisons to his oral history subjects, when warranted. Here Ransel discusses the abysmal infant mortality rates in Russia (284 deaths per 1,000 live births in the empire as a whole between 1896-97), child-care practices, medical commentary on village life, and differences between Russian and Tatar villages. Early Soviet attempts to deal with these

problems had little practical effect and in some cases the conditions in the countryside worsened. Nonetheless, Soviet efforts to transform mothering eventually led to far-reaching changes in the way women would give birth and raise their children. As Ransel notes, “The government and Party activists in the fields of women’s affairs and health looked on rural women as wholly incompetent in their mothering roles.... Activists first tried to mount educational campaigns ... but they soon realized that only by delivering medical and child-care services to the villages could they hope to make headway against the established regime of birthing and care” (p. 79).

Subsequent chapters break down thematically as Ransel examines topics such as courtship and marriage, fertility choices, giving birth, baptism and equivalent Muslim rites, coping with infant death, and child care. In each chapter, Ransel looks at generational differences as well as differences and similarities between Tatar and Russian women. The first generation of women Ransel examines came of age during World War I, the Revolution, and the Civil War. Many of these women remembered collectivization and some had memories of their families *dekulakization*. Ransel explains that although this generation lived through enormous political and social changes, their values, child care practices, and ethics “were grounded in an earlier time, in the pre-Soviet collectivist values of the village order of the nineteenth century” (p. 238). The second generation came of age with the Soviet system already established. But, these women also lived in a time of profound political and social changes, including the war against Japan, World War II, and Stalin’s rule. In contrast to women of the first generation, Ransel notes that these women “regarded their lives as not only hard but as unfair and unfulfilled” (p. 239). He notes that most of these women worked extraordinarily hard during difficult economic times, and that they felt their sufferings and sacrifices had not been rewarded. Women of the third generation were born in the 1930s and after; thus, they did not begin building families until after the death of Stalin. According to Ransel, these women were, to one degree or another, “Sovietized” and usually could look forward to more prosperous lives than their mothers and grandmothers. Although Tatar women also were frequently “Sovietized” and shared many things in common with rural Russian women, Ransel does note some differences. Ransel observes that Tatar women of all generations found less independence in matters of courtship and marriage. He also detects a great deal of pride in all generations concerning their communities and heritage.

Village Mothers is accessibly written and should be interesting and useful to a wide variety of audiences. Historians of medicine, gender, Russia, and Europe should all find useful material here. The book could be used profitably in some upper-level undergraduate courses as well. The stories of these women are extraordinarily interesting and Ransel’s prose will not frighten off undergraduate readers. Finally, Ransel’s interweaving of oral histories, traditional historical narrative, archival research, and generational change would make profitable reading for historians interested in the construction of memory, village life, midwifery, and medical intervention. The only flaw in this ambitious, informative, and engaging book is Ransel’s lack of engagement with the literature on oral history, memory, and theory. He does note that his book seeks to examine marriage, fertility choices, and birthing among rural women, but that he neither asks nor examines the question of whether these were defining experiences in these women’s lives. While it might be an impossible question to answer in the end, some speculation about the degree to which these women’s remembered stories vary from the historical narrative and/or what questions their stories raise in terms of the accepted historical narrative would have been interesting. Nonetheless, Ransel’s work presents us with a picture of amazing endurance, ingenuity, and flexibility among this group of women. “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). Ransel’s study provides an engaging starting point for broader exploration of these issues and will provide fertile ground for further discussions and research.

Notes

[1]. David Ransel, ed., *The Family in Imperial Russia: New Lines of Historical Research* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978); and David Ransel, *Mothers of Misery: Child Abandonment in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[2]. For an older example of oral history, see Carola Hansson and Karin Liden, eds., *Moscow Women: Thirteen Interviews* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983). For a post-glasnost example, see Barbara Alpern Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, eds., *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

[3]. There are of course some notable exceptions, including Beatrice Farnsworth and Lynne Viola, eds., *Rus-*

sian Peasant Women (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Christine D. Worobec, *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

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