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Anna Bek. *The Life of a Russian Woman Doctor: A Siberian Memoir, 1869-1954.* Foreword by Adele Lindenmeyr. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. xvi + 128 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21717-2.

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Anne Rassweiler (editor and translator of Anna Bek's memoir) discovered Bek's memoir when she ran an advertisement in a Novosibirsk newspaper seeking local memoirs of the revolutionary period. During the time that Rassweiler continued her research, the memoir was published in Russian by Bek's grandson.[1] Rassweiler's annotated version allows the English speaking world a glimpse of the travails of one female Russian doctor working outside of the capital cities. The story of women entering the medical profession in late imperial Russia remains little known to the general public (and indeed to many historians outside of Russian studies). While there has been a great increase in the number of works published in English about Russian women, a dearth of primary sources available to English speaking students and interested parties remains.[2] The availability of Bek's memoir in English should help to rectify this situation. The memoir's style is clear and the story is compelling. Furthermore, Rassweiler's introductions and annotations make the memoir usable for courses in Russian history, gender history, medical history, and general European history.

Rassweiler divides Bek's memoir into five chapters and begins each chapter with a brief introduction to ground the reader in the events surrounding the memoir. Bek's memoir tells her story from her childhood to her retirement. Her descriptions of everyday life and everyday problems allow us to glimpse the difficulties faced by professionals in modern Russia as it transformed from an autocratic imperial state into a bureaucratic Soviet one. She grew up and practiced medicine during one of the most tumultuous periods in Russian history. Bek's life witnessed many historic events: the Russo-Japanese War, the two world wars, the Russian Revolution, and the many social and political changes that came with Joseph Stalin's rise to power, including his purges. However, Bek touches very lightly or not at all on many of these events.

As is often the case with memoirs, readers may want to know more about the events that Bek chose not to discuss. Some readers will wish for a more in-depth and analytical introduction, but Rassweiler has chosen to keep the book short and accessible to a general readership. In keeping with the style of the work that emphasizes giving voice to Bek and keeping short introductions readable, Rassweiler does not delve much into exploring why Bek may have avoided these events in her writing and in what ways these events may have influenced her life. Rassweiler notes that "Anna Nikolaevana's [Bek] memoirs say very little about the much broader conflicts and upheavals that shook the country outside the university during the 1920s and 1930s even though their repercussions can be seen in her experiences as a professor and scholar" (p. 107). Rassweiler then questions what the author would have known about the five year plans, the conditions of collectivization, and the conditions at both agricultural and industrial working sites. But she concludes that "whatever she read, saw or heard did not find its way into her memoirs, and it is difficult to discern the impact of these national events on her life and her views. Writing in 1948 at the height of Stalinism, perhaps she was afraid to write anything that could be construed as critical of the Communist Party, even in a private memoir, since such criticism might endanger her family if it became known. Perhaps as a Marxist who shared the Russian intelligentsia's faith in economic and social progress, she supported the party's economic policies and goals while regretting the human cost" (p. 108). Rassweiler, who traveled extensively in Russia, worked in many Siberian archives, and spent many years teaching Russian history is certainly qualified to comment on some of these issues, but instead she chooses to let Bek's memoir speak for itself.

While the book's main purpose is to bring to light Bek's life in late imperial and early Soviet Siberia, Rassweiler's descriptions of her own difficulties in traveling and doing research in postcommunist Russia are fascinating, and her descriptions of life in the 1990s in small Siberian towns are just as interesting as Bek's experi-

ences one century earlier. In fact, Rassweiler's reader is left wishing she had written a companion volume describing her experiences as a researcher and traveler through these mostly unexplored and inaccessible places during a time of rapid transitions. Rassweiler managed to gain access to many small archives, libraries, and museums, which would have been inaccessible to a foreigner even a couple of years earlier. Her stories of working in Russian archives and museums and traveling in Russia will give students, scholars, and the general public a glimpse of the historical research process.

Unlike the editor who traveled in Siberia in the immediate postcommunist era, Bek traveled within Russia and in Europe prior to the advent of Communism. Bek arrived in Saint Petersburg in 1894 planning to study medicine. While Bek is certainly an extraordinary woman, in many ways she was quite typical of educated women of her generation. Although medical courses had opened for women, they were closed again by the time she arrived. Thus, with education closed to women in Russia, Bek, like hundreds of her female contemporaries, traveled abroad to study medicine. During the Russo-Japanese War, Bek served as a nurse and medical assistant at the front. When Bek completed her medical education, she traveled to many small towns to attempt to improve medical accessibility in regions outside of Saint Petersburg. As a more established physician, Bek opened clinics, taught in the evenings, wrote articles, and participated in medical congresses as did so many other female teachers, writers, physicians, and other types of female medical personnel.

Volumes have been written on the historical uses and misuses of memoirs. Autobiographies and memoirs remain contested historical sources. Although Bek's memoir certainly should be read as a constructed version of her life and not as the complete biographical version, the memoir nonetheless has great intrinsic value. First and foremost, Bek lived through two world wars and the revolution and yet she barely mentioned these events in her text. Her life was inexorably changed by Stalin's policies and yet readers must surmise for themselves what might have been going on in the broader bureaucratic world to cause her to resign her teaching post. Bek wrote the memoir as an interesting tale. She was clearly proud of the work she did and sad when she left it behind and retired, but neither she nor the editor chose to analyze these decisions. As is common for memoirists of the period (and even more true for women), Bek barely mentioned her personal life. The reader must also consider the fact that Bek's memoir was written late in life–she began writing it when she was already in her seventies. Despite the typical weaknesses of memoir as a genre, this memoir, like so many others, is extremely valuable for the picture it paints of life in provincial Russia and for the stories it tells about the struggles and successes of this amazing Russian woman doctor. And, while some details may have faded as Bek aged, the memoir resonates with many others written and published by Russian women physicians from the late nineteenth century into the modern period. Their struggles in obtaining proper medical care for their patients, serving in remote outposts, striving to overcome male opposition to female physicians, and working to create a modern medical system in Russia are told in a number of other memoirs published in thick journals of the nineteenth century and in medical journals of the early twentieth century. Bek's memoir adds to this genre by giving us access to a woman working outside of major cities and a woman who practiced medicine, taught, and worked in a university setting.

Many people who are only tangentially interested in history will enjoy reading Bek's memoir for the fascinating insights it provides into life in postrevolutionary Russia. *The Life of a Russian Woman Doctor* will also prove to be helpful for those teaching this period in Russian history. Although access to primary sources in English has improved in the past ten years, the book will be a welcome addition to the options that professors currently have. Finally, the book should increase academic interest in an important group of professionals during the early twentieth century and perhaps encourage scholars to attempt to locate enough sources to write a true scholarly account of events.

Notes

[1]. Evgeny Konstantinovich Andrusevich, ed., *Obshchee Delo* (Novosibirsk: Novosibirsk khronograph, 1996). This edition includes parts of Bek's memoir and her husband's medical dissertation.

[2]. See, for example, Toby Clyman, *Russia through Women's Eyes: Autobiographies from Tsarist Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and Barbara Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Christine Worobec, *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

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