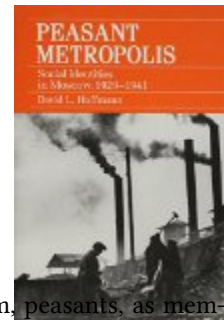


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David L. Hoffmann. *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow, 1929-1941*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994. xiii + 282 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-2942-2.

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Although the field of Soviet history is replete with studies, both scholarly and sensational, of the violence and industrial growth of the Stalinist thirties, until the appearance of David Hoffmann's new book, no one devoted an entire work to what may arguably be one of the most momentous transformations of the twentieth century—the migration of over twenty million peasants to the urban centers of the Soviet Union in the course of only thirteen years. Peasant migration does not have nearly the immediate appeal of topics such as collectivization, the major projects of the five-year plans, or the Great Purges, and yet it is intimately connected with all of them and may be regarded as having greater long-term consequences for Russian history.

Pushed by declining living standards in the countryside and the violence of collectivization, and pulled by opportunities for employment at new construction sites and expanding factories, peasants from central Russia jammed the rail lines into the capital city, bringing with them cultural traditions that would complicate the state's grand design of socialist construction. Unlike earlier accounts that have portrayed the migration as a chaotic rush of peasants into the cities, Hoffmann argues that the process was neither controlled nor patternless but followed long-standing traditions of seasonal labor. Leaving one's home for an unfamiliar setting involved risk, and the vast majority of peasant migrants relied on family or village connections to establish a foothold in the city. Such connections served not only to obtain housing and employment but also as a basis for organization within factories or construction sites, where peasant artels persisted openly or in the guise of labor communes or "brigades."

The massive influx of peasants was the source of great

concern for party officials. To them, peasants, as members of a "petit-bourgeois" class, represented an "uncultured mass" whose drinking, lack of discipline, religious beliefs, and general lack of political consciousness threatened to disrupt production and infect younger workers with a class-alien ideology. Indeed, to party officials, peasants were the antithesis of the "New Soviet Person," and propagandists struggled to remake them in the image of idealized proletarians. Yet however important, political education was not the state's first priority, and despite their efforts, agitators found that their efforts had little impact on deeply rooted peasant traditions.

Although rapidly expanding industries required greater and greater numbers of workers, the arrival of hordes of inexperienced laborers from the country disrupted life in Moscow in ways that had little to do with political consciousness. From a logistical standpoint, the flood of peasants placed immense strains on the state's ability to provide adequate housing or food supply. Most workers found lodging in worker barracks attached to their place of employment, but such places were notorious for crime and unsanitary conditions. Housing was simply low on the list of construction projects, and factory directors often used their own resources to construct lodgings as a means of holding on to workers, who were always in short supply.

In the factories, new workers were frequent targets of harrassment from other workers or were deliberately snubbed in their efforts to improve their skills or status. The state recognized the need to prepare young recruits for technical work—minimally skilled construction workers often found employment in the very factories they had themselves helped to build—but the tempo of industrialization and the limited resources for training

obliged managers to rely on an accelerated system of apprenticeship. Skilled workers proved unwilling to share their knowledge, however, fearing that the loss of their monopoly over specialized jobs threatened their only resource in negotiations for wages and status. Young workers of urban origin often attacked peasant workers by raising the banner of “shock” work, emphasizing their own proletarian stock and exposing their competitors as “uncouth,” “lazy,” or “politically backward” (pp. 115-16).

Hoffmann has presented a vivid portrayal of life in the expanding “peasant metropolis.” He introduces his chapters with statements from former peasants who moved to Moscow in the 1930s and whom he interviewed in the course of his research. Gone are the days when Western authors “changed the names to protect the innocent”; Hoffmann’s subjects seem to have been wonderfully forthcoming and candid. It is regrettable that he did not make more use of his interviews, for most often such material only makes its way into opening paragraphs. Nevertheless, this is a remarkable social history, and no one interested in Soviet industrialization can afford to ignore it.

Yet the fundamental question Hoffmann poses— “[D]id the Soviet system transform the peasants, or did peasants transform the Soviet system? ” (pp. 10-11)— does not receive a clear answer in this book. Hoffmann follows this query in his introduction with the reasonable assertion that “The confrontation in the 1930s between Soviet officialdom and the mass of peasant in- migrants forced each party to reach accommodation with the other” (p. 11). The story he tells, however, and his concluding statements suggest that Hoffmann believes the weight of transformative strength to have been firmly on the side of peasant in-migrants. In his chapters entitled “Official Culture and Peasant Culture” and “Social Identity and Labor Politics,” Hoffmann points out peasant accommodations to the rhythms of urban life and the constraints of official culture. Yet even in this respect peasants appropriated the language of official discourse in ways that preserved the integrity of traditional groups and behavior. Time and again Hoffmann relates stories of the state apparatus failing in its attempts to train, house,

educate, or remake peasants in the image of the Soviet proletarian. Indeed, in his conclusion he asserts “most former peasants never internalized the role of loyal proletarian, nor did they develop an allegiance to the Soviet government” (p. 217) and, more boldly, “the millions of peasants who became workers rejected the identity of the New Soviet Person that Soviet officials sought to impose upon them” (p. 219).

On the basis of the immense body of evidence Hoffmann has amassed, such categorical arguments may not seem inappropriate. Yet the most serious flaw I find in this book is the assumption that a thorough assessment of the impact of peasant in-migration can be confined to the decade in which it occurred. Certainly the Soviet government could not remake peasants into its own proletarian ideal in the short time Hoffmann covers, and few would argue that they ever totally succeeded in such a goal. Yet thousands, if not millions, of those peasants went on to become loyal party members and even party leaders in the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s. If we are to answer Hoffmann’s question about who transformed whom, we will need a long-term view that takes into account the effects of the migration on Russia’s social and cultural development in the post-Stalin era.

Quibbles aside, this book deserves high praise. Hoffmann has successfully woven together numerous strands of a story of social, cultural, and economic transformation into one of the most engaging portraits of Soviet life in the 1930s I have read. Students and researchers will mine his bibliography, which includes the titles of 107 newspapers and journals, fondy and paper collections from fifteen libraries and archives, and a rich assortment of published primary sources. His prose is clear, and, unlike most specialized monographs, this book might be effectively used in upper-level undergraduate courses to illustrate a wide variety of issues. Hoffmann’s book will not supplant existing literature, but it will nonetheless be a staple for students of Soviet history.

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