

Between the Fields & the City

Women, Work, & Family in Russia, 1861-1914



Barbara Alpern Engel

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996

First published 1995

Reprinted 1996

First paperback edition 1996

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-521-44236-2 hardback

ISBN 0-521-56621-5 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004



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In the period following the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, Russia began to industrialize, and peasants, especially peasants of the Central Industrial Region around Moscow, increasingly began to interact with a market economy. In response to a growing need for cash and declining opportunities to earn it at home, thousands of peasant men and women left their villages to earn wages elsewhere, many in the cities of Moscow or St. Petersburg.

The significance and consequences of peasant women's migration is the subject of this book. Drawing on a wealth of new archival data, which contains first person-accounts of peasant women's experiences, the book provides the reader with a detailed account of the move from the village to the city. Unlike previous studies this one looks at the impact of migration on the peasantry, and at the experience of peasant workers in nearby factories, as well as in distant cities. Case studies explore the effects of industrialization and urbanization on the relationship of the migrant to the peasant household, and on family life and personal relations. They demonstrate the ambiguous consequences of change for women: While some found new and better opportunities, many more experienced increased hardship and risk. By illuminating the personal dimensions of economic and social change, this book provides a fresh perspective on the social history of late Imperial Russia.



Acknowledgments

For their contribution to the research and writing of this book, I am grateful to many institutions and individuals.

I would like to thank the W. Averell Harriman Institute for the Advanced Study of the Soviet Union, Columbia University, for a senior fellowship that supported my work in its early stages. A grant-in-aid from the Kennan Institute allowed me to explore the relationship between peasant parents and their children. Grants-in-aid from the Committee on Research and Creative Work of the University of Colorado facilitated research in Finland. Research in Russian archives and libraries was supported by grants from the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the United States Information Agency, as well as a grant from the Committee on Fulbright-Hays Fellowships. A fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson Center enabled me to complete the manuscript of this book. I owe a special thanks to the Wilson Center staff for doing everything they could to make my residence at the Center pleasant as well as productive.

Librarians at the following institutions facilitated my research: Butler Library of Columbia University; the Library of Congress; the National Institute of Health Library; the library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; the Lenin Library and the Institute for Scientific Information in the Social Sciences under the Academy of Sciences (INION) in Moscow; the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library and the Library of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. I am particularly indebted to the staff of the Slavic Library in Helsinki, who cheerfully helped me to track down even the most elusive of references. My archival research in the former Soviet Union was assisted by the staffs of the following archives: the Central State Historical Archive of the City of Moscow (TsGIAgM); the Central State Archive of the October Revolution (TsGAOR SSSR); the Central State Historical Archive of Leningrad (TsGIAL); the Central State Historical Archive (TsGIA SSSR); and the Tenishev Archive of the State Museum of Ethnography of

the Peoples of the USSR. I owe special thanks to Evdokiia L. Timofeeva for facilitating my research in the Tenishev Archive and making it so enjoyable; to Galina A. Ippolitova for her willingness to provide the endless piles of *dela* that work on this project demanded; to Gita M. Lipson for sharing with me her knowledge of archival resources; and to Valerii M. Shishkin for providing access to materials I needed for the final stage of my research.

In the course of a decade researching and writing this book, I have benefited from the encouragement and assistance of many friends and colleagues. Joseph Bradley, Daniel Brower, Gregory Freeze, Heather Hogan, Robert Johnson, Adele Lindenmeyr, Jonathan Sanders, William Wagner, Reginald Zelnik, and, especially, Timothy Mixer helped me to find my way when I was still new to the field. V.A. Fedorov provided guidance when I was a *stazher* in Moscow in 1985; and Grigorii A. Tishkin did everything in his power to make my research visit to Leningrad in 1991 both productive and pleasant. Ellen Ross and Wendy Goldman provided stimulating conversation and challenging questions. The book has benefited immeasurably from critical readings by Joseph Bradley, Laura Engelstein, Karen Fields, Wendy Goldman, Heather Hogan, David Ransel, William Wagner, Elizabeth Waters, and Christine Worobec. They have helped me to hone my arguments and to correct errors of fact and interpretation; and they have stimulated me to rethink, although not always to revise, my analyses. The shortcomings that remain are entirely my responsibility.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Pat Murphy of the history department of the University of Colorado, for resolving my computer problems more often than I like to remember and assisting in the production of the tables; and to Gladys Bloedow for negotiating bureaucracies with inventiveness and good will. Caroline Hinkley prepared several of the photographs for publication. Sarah Despres, my research assistant at the Woodrow Wilson Center, greatly facilitated my writing and made my tenure at the Center a lot more fun.

Finally, for sustaining me during the long years I worked on this book, I am more grateful than words can say to my families: in Moscow, S. and E.C., and Zh., in St. Petersburg, S.B. and I.R., E.T.; and S.M.L.; and here at home, Minette and William Alpern; and most of all, LeRoy Moore.

Parts of this book have appeared in print elsewhere in a somewhat different form. Chapter 2 appeared as "The Woman's Side: Male Out-Migration and the Family Economy in Kostroma Province," *Slavic Review* 45, n. 2 (Summer 1986): 257-71; Chapter 4 appeared as "Between Field and Factory: Women,

Work and Family in the Factories of Rural Russia in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Russian History* 16, n. 2-4 (1989): 223-37; and Chapter 6 as "St. Petersburg Prostitutes in the Late Nineteenth Century: A Personal and Social Profile," *Russian Review* 48, n. 1 (1989): 21-44. My thanks to the editors for their cooperation in the republication of these materials.

All dates in this book are given according to the Julian Calendar, unless otherwise indicated. The Julian Calendar was twelve days behind the Gregorian in the nineteenth century, and thirteen days behind in the twentieth. I have transliterated the Russian according to the Library of Congress system, with a few exceptions. When giving the first names of individuals, I have omitted diacritical signs (Avdotiia instead of Avdot'iia) and I have transliterated "e" as "yo" (Fyodor instead of Fedor). I have anglicized the plurals of Russian measurements and of well-known terms like *artel*; I have also used the anglicized versions of well-known names and places.

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Introduction

In the half century between the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the outbreak of World War I, it remained a very long way from the village to the city. Footpaths or unpaved, rutted roads connected peasant villages scattered over Russia's vast expanses. Following decades of rapid expansion, railroads still linked only the most substantial provincial towns to major urban centers in the early years of the twentieth century. The estate in Tver' province where Nina Berberova (born 1901) spent her childhood was seventy miles from the nearest railroad station. "These were grim, wretched wild places," she remembered. "Wolves and bears roamed the forests; fields stretched on for a hundred miles. The horizon was straight and hard, and paths, often only log paths, led into the limitless distance, where only skylarks sang their song."¹ From such remote places the peasant migrant would have to travel for days on foot or, if fortunate, by horse-drawn cart before she could reach a railroad station. And a migrant had to traverse other and no less formidable distances to live in a major urban center. The city offered another sort of life than she had known in her village. Urban dwellers looked different: The men's hair was cut city-fashion, instead of under a bowl, and their shirts were worn inside instead of outside their pants. Almost everyone wore factory-made fabrics even when they went to work, whereas villagers continued to wear homespun except on special occasions. In the city, people timed their work by the clock, rather than by the sun and the seasons as they did in the village. The pace of urban life was much faster and the noise level higher. Villagers spent their days amidst familiar faces, engaging in activities that had engaged their mothers and grandmothers before them, while in the city they encountered strangers whose ways appeared equally strange.

In the decades after the emancipation of the serfs, increasing numbers of peasant women and men traversed these distances. The terms of the emancipation of the serfs combined with other changes to intensify greatly the

1 Nina Berberova, *The Italics Are Mine* (New York, 1969), 10.

peasants' need for cash. The emancipation granted many peasants less land than they had tilled in the days of serfdom and required all but the recipients of paupers' allotments to redeem the land over a period of forty-nine years, and at a rate that often exceeded its market value. In addition to redemption payments, peasants owed taxes to the state and dues to support the work of the local elective self-government, the *zemstvo*. Explosive population growth between 1861 and 1905 forced peasants to support these fiscal obligations on a declining amount of land per capita: By 1900, the average peasant's allotment had shrunk by over a third.

The emancipation also signaled the start of Russia's industrial revolution. Industrialization proceeded slowly in the 1860s and 1870s, grew rapidly in the 1890s and then again in the years prior to World War I. Although it took place at the initiative of an autocratic state, rather than an entrepreneurial class, in many respects, Russia's industrialization resembled the process that England had experienced beginning in the late eighteenth century and Western Europe several decades later. Machinery took over the production of goods that people had formerly made by hand, destroying many of the cottage industries that had enabled peasants to supplement agricultural income in their villages. As a result, increasing numbers of people left the place of their birth to earn their living laboring in factories and mills. Russia's industrialization was also distinctive, however. The process began much later than it had in the West, and it proceeded far more rapidly and unevenly and against the background of a peasant way of life that had remained little changed for centuries. To be sure, recent scholarly work has demonstrated the significance of proto-industrialization even under serfdom. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, thousands of peasants in hundreds of villages wove silk, linen, or cotton, while thousands more tanned hides and worked metal for sale on the market.² Nevertheless, on the eve of emancipation, proto-industrial production constituted only a tiny share of the national economy.³ Most proto-industrial workers continued to shift between agriculture and domestic production and to remain within the relatively insular world of the Russian village. This was especially true for women, who were far less likely than men to travel elsewhere to market goods or search for work. For the vast majority of peasants, Russia's industrialization would bring dramatic, sometimes wrenching change.

2 Edgar Melton has surveyed this scholarship and produced his own contribution to it in "Proto-Industrialization, Serf Agriculture, and Agrarian Social Structure: Two Estates in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *Past and Present*, no. 115 (May 1987): 69-106.

3 *Ibid.*, 80.

Labor force statistics give a sense of pace and numbers. Between 1887 and 1900, over a million people entered the industrial labor force more than doubling the number of workers. Millions more found work in artisanal trades, in service, in construction, and in other sectors of the expanding economy. In 1897, when Russia's first national census was conducted, there were 6.4 million hired workers.⁴ Most of these workers derived from peasant villages. In the Central Industrial Region, where outmigration for wages was at its most intense, one of every four or five villagers was off working elsewhere by the early twentieth century. In Western Europe, too, peasants had supplied a large proportion of the workforce in the early stages of industrialization. However, in the West the path from village to city or factory was usually a one-way street, whereas in Russia, all but a few migrants went back as well as forth. Maintaining their village ties, sending a portion of their wages back to their families, migrants remained away from home for a few months or years; then they returned for good to their villages. The Stolypin reforms of 1906-7 changed this situation to some extent. The reforms were aimed at creating a strong, independent capitalist peasantry that would serve as a source of stability in the countryside. They enabled peasants more easily to sever their ties with their villages and, in some cases, deprived young peasant men of their claims to family allotments and, consequently, of their incentive to return home. While historians differ concerning the overall impact, there can be no question that the reforms increased the flow of peasants from the village and made it more likely that migration would be a one-way trip.

Industrialization and urbanization profoundly affected the peasant way of life. In Russia, the peasant household was also a family economy in the sense that every able-bodied member, including children, worked to ensure that the family household survived. Both family household and village were patriarchal in organization: Elders held power over the young and men held power over women. In the family household, males as well as females remained subject to the father's will so long as the father lived, and he deployed their labor and disposed of their earnings according to household need. The proliferation of capitalist wage relations and the expansion of industrial employment challenged these well-established power relations. Even as wage migration to distant places provided the cash that helped to sustain the peasant family economy, it loosened patriarchal control of the

4 Victoria Bonnell, ed. *The Russian Worker: Life and Labor under the Tsarist Regime* (Berkeley, Calif., 1983), 1-2.

wage earner. Moreover, urban experiences that broadened horizons and heightened expectations sometimes put the migrant at odds with the family collective, sometimes made it more difficult to merge that individual's "I" into the "we" of family or village life. As I hope to demonstrate in the following pages, changes that slackened the hold of the patriarchal family provided new opportunities for peasant women, but they also rendered women more economically and personally vulnerable.

The significance and consequences of peasant women's migration is the subject of this book. It will follow migrants as they moved between the fields and the factories and cities, looking at the peasantry from which they derived as well as at the urban lower class that they joined. The first part of the book offers an examination of the peasant way of life in villages of the Central Industrial Region, Russia's most "modern" region and the region that the greatest number of peasants left in search of wages.⁵ The second part explores migrant women's experiences in the city and belongs to a growing body of literature that treats the formation of the Russian working class, although unlike the bulk of this literature, it concentrates on the experience of women. Historians of Russia have long debated the extent to which peasant migration from village to city constituted a break with the past. I want to address this question too and to ask what such a break might mean to women. But I will also look in the other direction, examining the ways that the migration of women and men affected the villages they left behind. Like its title, this study will straddle two worlds.

So did many of the women and men who populate its pages. Peasant practices helped migrants to adapt to urban life: They traveled along well-trodden paths to the city, initially received help from or resided with kinfolk or people from their locale (*zemliaki*); and they perceived the world they encountered through the prism of their peasant past. Yet, at least in the eyes of fellow villagers, the time they spent in the city changed many migrants. The city figured ambiguously in the mental landscape of Russia's peasants: It offered cash and goods the village needed, but in an unhealthy environment of freedom and license. Young people, young women in particular, risked becoming "spoiled" there. Such fears reflected the contradictory character of wage migration to a major urban center.

The effect of wage migration on the peasant world has received comparatively little attention from historians writing in English. Instead, studies of

5 The provinces of the Central Industrial Region were Tver', Iaroslavl', Moscow, Vladimir, Kostroma, and Nizhnii Novgorod.

peasant life emphasize the tenacity of custom and tradition and stress continuity over change. This study aims to adjust rather than to challenge this overall picture by drawing attention to some of the ways that migration affected the village and gender mediated change. In order to identify constituencies for change in the village, in the first four chapters that treat the peasantry I have heeded peasant women's discordant voices far more closely than their fellow villagers usually did. Documentation of women's discontent is available from both published and archival sources. Peasant women could bring their grievances to cantonal (*volost'*) courts, administered by the peasants themselves; if they failed to find satisfaction, they had the right to appeal to civil authorities in the district or provincial committees that administered peasant affairs, or even to petition the tsar, although relatively few women availed themselves of these possibilities. Some married women simply took matters into their own hands and fled households where they felt unhappy. If a husband attempted to bring a wife home again or, much more rarely, brought suit for separation or divorce, the woman had a chance to tell her own side of the story. In my quest for women's voices, I will draw extensively on *volost'* court cases, on petitions to the authorities, and on transcripts of divorce testimonies. The voices that emerge are those of a small minority of peasant women, who nevertheless offer an important perspective on village life. Unwilling or unable to put up with situations or treatment that others managed to accept, they expose the fault lines of peasant society, the places where it might crack under pressure.

Such women were also the most likely to respond as individuals to the siren song of the city and to seek the alternative life that it offered. They were not, however, the majority of women migrants, who were themselves a small minority of peasant women. As late as 1910, only a fraction of peasant women left the village for the city. And most of those who did were women on the margins, widows and spinsters, or women from impoverished households who left for family, not individual, reasons: to relieve the family of an unnecessary pair of hands and a mouth it could not feed; to gain additional resources for the family economy; to accompany a husband who worked elsewhere. Unskilled, usually illiterate, most of them found semidependent positions as servants, cooks, or nursemaids, or they held jobs in industries where they earned about half of what men did, wages that put them at or below subsistence level. Often, the greater a woman's independence from village and kin, the more economically vulnerable she became. I will explore the effect of economic and social circumstances on single women's efforts to shape lives for themselves in the city, by examining illegitimacy (Chapter 5)

and prostitution (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 looks at a relative rarity, the co-habiting working-class family in the city.

Like the women and men they study, the following chapters will sometimes weave back and forth between the village and the city. The organization of this book is more thematic than chronological. The examination of village life begins in 1861, with the emancipation of the serfs, but the chapters on the city focus on a somewhat later period, from 1880 to 1914, when migration from village to city had become quite substantial. The story stops at the outbreak of World War I, which changed the picture dramatically by sending millions of men off to war and bringing unprecedented numbers of their wives, sisters, and daughters to the city. I have chosen to present my material in the form of case studies and to focus on particular regions, problems, and aspects of women's lives, rather than to attempt a comprehensive history of peasant women as they moved between the village and the city. Among other important topics, the role of religion in peasant women's lives remains unexplored. The primary sources I read had almost nothing to say about it, and I found few secondary works that treated the subject to my satisfaction. Nevertheless, certain themes will recur: One is the flexibility with which patriarchal village structures adapted to economic and social change; another is the ambiguous effect of such change on women themselves. Some women experienced it as opportunity, others as loss. Their story has not been told before; it puts the history we thought we knew into a different perspective.