

**The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise. By Laura J. Olson and Svetlana Adonyeva. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. 368 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Glossary. Index. Photographs. \$39.95, Paper.**

*Elaine MacKinnon, Department of History, University of West Georgia*

It has never been easy for outsiders to penetrate the closed communities of the Russian peasantry. Consequently, certain elements of rural life and culture remain shrouded in a veil of mystery and misperceptions. Understanding gender in the Russian villages is particularly elusive, because women tend to perform their various roles in not readily visible domestic spheres, and patriarchal norms prohibit women's interactions with strangers. Two scholars, Laura J. Olson, an American, and Svetlana Adonyeva, a Russian, have joined forces to overcome such barriers to study the lives of Russian village women. The result of their three-decade long research project, *The Worlds of Russian Village Women: Tradition, Transgression, Compromise*, opens a valuable window into the lives of three generations of Russian women and the history of their communities set against the backdrop of the twentieth century. This richly detailed and comprehensive work portrays women both as individuals and as social agents, and makes a compelling case for the preeminence of gender and age as major factors shaping rural communities today.

The book challenges previous scholarship on Russian folklore and ethnography. The authors contend that because rural women have not traditionally sung or told stories in public, but rather did so in private spaces, often to exclusively female audiences, they have been ignored or misinterpreted by folklorists. Looking at women solely through the lens of patriarchy contributed to scholars minimalizing of the significance of culture as a realm within which women find agency and even empowerment. Women possess their own traditions, and these play a significant role in the ways they exercise power within a patriarchal order. Olson and Adonyeva depart from previous researchers in that they focus primarily on recording and analyzing women's own thoughts and explanations for the songs, stories, and rituals that they perform. From 1983 until 2009, they conducted interviews with women born prior to 1950 in rural communities in northern and central Russia. This created personal channels of communication, observation, and interaction that then offered access to the domestic spaces of women's cultural and social agency. The interviews also afford the authors scope for analyzing the important interplay between individual motives and community norms. They show how women either transgress or make compromises with social customs and thereby shape the interpretation and transmission of tradition. Their long term commitment to the project also enabled them to observe women at different phases of the life cycle, and during different seasons of the year, providing a clear sense of how women's roles change over time.

Both authors bring to their analysis a shared interest and training in folklore, gender, and cultural studies. Seven of the nine chapters explore women's engagement in various cultural and social activities, including storytelling, singing, performing *chastushki* (short four-line lyrics that are often satirical and challenge social norms and hierarchies), witchcraft, gossip, superstitions, courtship, marriage, and death rituals. Their analysis of songs, stories, anecdotes and fables

demonstrate the resiliency of traditional beliefs and customs. Village women still construct identities through folk singing, and in particular romantic odes that reflect the patriarchy of the past rather than the norms of the present. The authors also illuminate more modern rituals such as soap opera watching, which has become a means of social cohesion and moral agency. Women are revealed to be major contributors to the corpus of rural folklore, though they tell stories and practice magic in ways decidedly different from men. Women use cultural forms such as folk singing to tell their own stories and unlike men, seek less to entertain than to transmit values. The authors also show how women act as primary spiritual guardians of their households and their communities, which is empowering even within a still prevalent framework of patriarchy.

Due to its interdisciplinary approach and content, this book will be of interest to scholars in multiple fields, including history, folklore, gender studies, cultural anthropology and sociology. The book is particularly useful for students because of its discussion of methodology for social and cultural analysis, including using gender identity as a means for gaining access to rural women's domestic spaces. They engage in critical dialogue about their use of interviews, and thoughtfully analyze moments where they believe cultural misunderstandings may be occurring. Most beneficial for students is the fact that this book is not simply a compendium of interview transcripts, folk songs, and other cultural texts. The authors provide a lively and insightful narrative, through which they contextualize and interpret these source materials, and compare their analyses with that of other researchers from both Russia and the West.

Though panoramic in its portrait of women's lives, the book has limits, especially with the size of its sample. It relies primarily upon subjective statements of self-selected women from only a small number of rural communities in one region of Russia. Some may contest the authors' claims for the significance of subjectivity in determining the exact nature of what women's lives are like, and of how power is exercised. Despite these limitations, however, this is a groundbreaking study that not only broadens our understanding of women's lives in the Russian countryside, but also tells an important story of how rural communities weathered the twentieth century's upheavals of war, revolution, collectivization, and the collapse of Soviet communism. The book is, moreover, a testament to the fruitfulness of collaborative research between Russia and the West. It offers a unique and intimate glimpse into the world and mindset of these village women, the stories they tell and the songs they sing. It is an engrossing book to read whether or not one specializes specifically in Russian cultural studies and history. The authors draw readers into these women's lives in a meaningful way, by making the women as familiar to the reader as they are to the authors themselves. It illuminates the essential role of culture as a medium for the negotiation of social and political power in rural communities. The hope is that this will inspire similar multi-disciplinary approaches to the study of gender and peasant life in other regions of Russia and the world.