

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

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As indicated by the awards it has won—the 2013 Chicago Folklore Prize and the Eli Kögäs-Maranda Prize for folklore studies of women—this is an excellent book, at once an examination of Russian folk culture, an ethnography of rural women in Russia, and a thoughtful exploration of the challenges of carrying out this kind of work.

Motivated by the desire to introduce gender and stage of life cycle explicitly into an examination of folk tradition, the authors challenge the view they ascribe to standard ethnography and folklore studies that authentic folk culture is essentially that performed by men—often as solo performers—in public places. Their own focus is on the styles of songs and tales performed by women, usually in the domestic sphere and often as a way of marking important events and life passages. They are especially interested in how these songs and tales are used and what they tell us about the lives of those who perform them. The folk practices explored in this book are thus viewed not as cultural artifacts to be preserved in some sort of ideal condition but rather as means by which women in rural Russia have navigated, shaped and understood their lives.

The study draws on over two decades of fieldwork, beginning in the early 1980s, shortly before Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary. Some of the fieldwork was conducted by Olson, Associate Professor in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Colorado, Boulder, some by Adonyeva, professor of folklore and the theory of literature at St. Petersburg University, and some by students at St. Petersburg State University. Although the authors appear to be of roughly the same generation, they came to this project with different training and different life experiences and were likely to be viewed somewhat differently by their interlocutors. That the book is nonetheless seamless is testament to how strongly the authors are committed to helping readers understand how the village women themselves understand their lives. Except for a few instances where a particular, individual encounter provides important insight, the authors write as “we” and they have integrated these rare exceptions entirely smoothly.

Olson and Adonyeva weave examples of songs, tales and practices into a discussion of the life experiences of three generations of village women—those born before the 1917 Revolution, those born between 1917 and 1929, and those born between 1930 and 1950. We learn of marriage, childbirth, and death, of gender roles and power relations, of the role of magic in maintaining and developing relationships both among the living and with the dead, and of the ways in which village women adapt cultural traditions and Soviet norms and policies to shape their identities. Given the dramatic events of the twentieth century and the ways in which these political and economic transformations have affected relations between genders and across generations, it is scarcely surprising that some of the traditions, most notably that of public

lamentation, have become attenuated. Other significant changes include the assumption of the role of spiritual leader of the community by the elder women, whose religious beliefs were largely ignored by and therefore safe from the Soviet authorities; a reduction in the importance of the mother-in-law as source of authority and magical knowledge for the youngest of the generations studied; and a transformation over the generations of the way young women exercised agency, especially in the realm of courtship and marriage. Despite the changes, however, it is clear that the women featured in this book have managed to preserve much of the rituals, music and magic of Russian rural culture as a deeply engrained and natural part of their lives.

The book is fascinating, full of examples from individual lives, judicious in its interpretation of these examples, careful to provide historical context and, in some cases, a description of the conditions in which the conversation unfolded. It offers much to those interested in the lives of Russian women, the practice of oral history or ethnography, or the complications for feminist theory posed by attempts to interpret other cultures.