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Review Of "Solovyovo: The Story Of Memory In A Russian Village" By M. Paxson

Sibelan E. S. Forrester
Swarthmore College, sforres1@swarthmore.edu

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Margaret Paxson. Solovyovo: The Story of Memory in a Russian Village. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2005. Distributed by Indiana University Press. Glossary of Russian Terms. Bibliography. Index. 389 pp. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 0-253-21801-2.

How does tradition survive in the Russian village after dekulakization, collectivization, and decades of Soviet marginalization? The village is a primary source of “Russianness,” and many city-dwellers retain strong family ties there. Almost all village residents who remain year-round are elderly, but younger relatives return in summer to help with work and then share in the harvest. What will happen as the older generation dies, personal connections grow tenuous, and traditional ways of life are lost? Margaret Paxson’s ethnography emerges from this kind of pathos: her hostess realizes she can no longer care for the family cow, and this means a shift from farming to life on a not-very-generous pension.

Paxson’s Solovyovo: The Story of Memory in a Russian Village is based on her doctoral dissertation, itself the result of extended fieldwork in a village near Belozersk, in the Russian North. The book offers rich information on the folklore and folk life of the area and some very interesting oral history, especially on the 1930s and the Second World War. Evocative photographs by Lucian Perkins, interspersed between chapters, make the location easier to visualize. Paxson identifies it only in her afterward as “the village I have called Solovyovo,” a gesture of renaming that both protects her informants’ privacy and creates a sort of imaginary place, generalized by its nowhere-ness though located more or less exactly with regard to towns big enough to find on a map. Until the 1990s no American researcher could have undertaken such a project, a fruit of post-Soviet access and scholarly collaboration. Paxson found the village and met its residents by way of Russian anthropologists, though it is her own personality and observant nature that provoke their responses and gather an enormous mass of information.

Sifting and shaping this material to bring out its meaning, Paxson arranges it in chapters on “being ‘one’s own’,” “radiance,” wonders, healing, etc., and frequently using one or another helpful concept from theory and scholarship – she pulls in not only anthropology, ethnography, folklore and folklife, but also political science, history, and linguistics as needed. Footnotes and bibliography root the book in surrounding discourses of Soviet and Russian studies without

interrupting the main text's flow. The overarching theme of memory encourages a loose structure, informative but not sharply pointed.

Paxson evokes the structure of Russian traditional society beginning with the *khoziain* and *khoziaika* – from her own hosts, the man and woman of the house, through domestic and nature spirits, local kolkhoz heads, and national leaders such as Stalin and Yel'tsin. (Her data predate Putin, whose approval ratings seem to depend largely on voters' perception that he is a strong "*khoziain*."). Paxson's lyrical style marks the book strongly, as befits a village she has named plausibly but also evocatively for the nightingale. One example is a paragraph that ponders the importance of icons, family portraits, portraits of state figures, numinous beings in the "red/beautiful corner" (*krasnyi ugol* – Paxson uses English to express the word's dual meanings):

Workers belong in the corner, as well – thousand-year-old ancestor workers. Perhaps the ancestor workers are more akin to the domovye than to Stalin, whose supremely Soviet image can look out from that corner as well. Perhaps the ancestor workers grant, from that corner, the power of the collective *svoi* through the long line of the rod, where Stalin's power is that of a distant, oft-forgotten nation *khoziain*. The danger comes, of course, when that raging power is not forgotten. When he dips into the corner space to subjugate and punish a nation full of *svoi*. (262)

The book invites readers to spend time, taking all 300-some pages to learn what the author has gathered and ponder what she asks and suggests, letting its significance accumulate and settle. This may make it more accessible and fascinating to any reader, but perhaps less so to readers who want to skim for facts fast and effectively, to lift a few quick quotes or polemical assertions rather than submerging themselves in the rhythms of the text.

The paragraph I cite also shows how Paxson leaves key Russian words in her text (*svoi*, *obrashchenie*, *rod*, and others); she tends to explain or define rather than translating. A two-page glossary of terms makes this easier on a reader without Russian. I wonder about the consequences of not creating or adopting English words; it creates some verbal awkwardness in the text, where words retain their Russian significance but float free of their Russian grammatical attributes. Paxson weaves the Russian terms into a web that is deliberately ambiguous in its deployment of meanings – here, too, she asks the reader to enter the mental and linguistic world of the village rather than to stand aside in analysis. Citing from the interviews she collected, Paxson keeps her

translations as literal as possible, respecting the style and delivery of her informants, but on the other hand sometimes making them sound less coherent than they surely were. The book is occasionally marred by sloppy editing, missing words, and inconsistent spelling of Russian words. The inconsistencies can be unfortunately distracting, given the book's many merits.

For all the book's local inflection and deep grounding in Russian history, Paxson raises issues germane to village life in other countries, including small towns in the US, with their residual folkways that are, similarly, both threatened and amazingly persistent. Given its role in the national self-image and the relatively recent past of so many Russians, the village remains important despite its economic difficulties and shrinking population. The Woodrow Wilson Center Press must be commended for making this thick, valuable and thought-provoking study so affordable. Solovyovo: The Story of Memory in a Russian Village is a wonderful resource not only for specialists and researchers, but also for teaching or recommending to students, and for giving to friends or relatives who wonder why we find Slavic cultures so fascinating.

Sibelan Forrester
Swarthmore College