

VILLAGE WOMEN IN 20TH CENTURY RUSSIA: THREE GENERATIONS OF CHANGE

David L. Ransel
Indiana University

Research for this study began about ten years ago, and a book will appear this fall titled *Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria* (Indiana University Press, 2000). The first two chapters of the book trace the entry of Western medical discourse on reproduction into Russia from the eighteenth century onward and its transmittal to villages during the late imperial and Soviet periods. The remainder of the book follows the reception of the new ideas and practices by three generations of Russian and Tatar village women in the twentieth century. Their oral testimony was collected in 100 interviews conducted in the spring and summer of 1990 and summers of 1993 and 1994. The principal interview sites were in Novgorod, Smolensk, Moscow, Tambov, Ul'ianovsk, and Sverdlovsk provinces. I did many of the interviews myself; Russian and Tatar collaborators conducted many others using my questionnaire. The chapters based on the oral interviews cover courtship and marriage, abortion and other means of birth limitation, birthing, baptism (and equivalent Muslim rites), coping with infant death, and early child care, including feeding, swaddling, and herbal and magical medical practices. What follows is an excerpt from the concluding chapter and constitutes a summary of the experience and stance of each of the three generations.

The First Generation

The women of the first generation grew up and came into consciousness at the time of World War I and the Revolution and Civil War of 1917-1920. They began working at home from age seven or younger, assisting their mothers in the barnyard and garden and looking after their younger siblings. Their paid working lives began in their early to mid teens when they took jobs as nannies or farm workers in the 1920s. They lived on family farms, including in some cases the large joint families of co-resident married brothers and their children under the overall authority of a patriarchal father. This was the time when fathers still ruled their families and controlled family-based farming operations, whether they were part of a communally managed land system or a separate, privately-owned farmstead. The girls of this first generation had little if any formal schooling, but

the Russians and even more so the Tatars were thoroughly tutored in the religious norms of their communities. They were taught to fear God, obey their parents unquestioningly, and remain chaste until marriage. They also learned the necessity and value of hard work through the example of their parents and the demands their parents placed on the girls themselves. The paid employment of their teenage years gave them the opportunity to contribute financially to their families and to build a trousseau for their later marriage. It also provided an introduction to a different way of life in the case of the girls who worked for families in towns.

A few of the women lived in families of adequate means, but most were not well off and, indeed, by any standard would be considered poor. The Tatar woman from Mordovia, Zuhra Pozdnikova, recalled a childhood without white bread. She claimed that when she first saw it during the Civil War at the beginning of the 1920s, she rejected it, not knowing what to make of it. "The city wasn't far away. One day father brought me a white roll. Up to that time, we had been baking only potato pancakes. When my father gave me the white roll, I threw it aside and asked for the usual [potato pancakes]." Her diet consisted largely of potatoes supplemented by carrots, radishes, and cabbage, plus apples and cherries when available.¹ Another measure of the poverty in which some of the informants had grown up can be seen in the lively retelling by Ekaterina Gerasimova of a discovery she made in teenage years when she went to work as a nanny. She was delighted to find that her employer had a butter churn and was able to cook pirogi in butter. "This was truly the good life," she declared.²

In choosing mates, the young women of this first generation enjoyed greater freedom than has been reported for peasant women of the mid-nineteenth century. The abolition of serfdom, reduction of household size, and increased contact with the city had by the early twentieth century expanded a young woman's opportunities to exercise choice in this matter. In most cases, the women of our first generation found their mates either at work or by attending parties, dances, and other sites of youth socializing. Even so, their

dependence on and ultimate loyalty to their natal families meant that if their fathers insisted, they would have had to allow themselves to be married off at his command, as indeed happened to some of the women, both Russian and Tatar, we interviewed from this generation.³

At the time the women of this generation were getting married and starting families, their lives were shaken by the upheaval of collectivization. Even though we did not ask questions specifically about this event, one-third of the informants in this generation volunteered stories about how their families had been dekulakized and their fathers exiled or killed. These women remembered this loss with bitterness. For those who had married before the change and settled into the life of private farming, collectivization disrupted and in some cases tore apart their families and ruined their lives. Women slightly younger who had not yet married explained how collectivization and the subsequent famine wrecked their chances of assembling an attractive trousseau and of getting properly established in life.

Yet the attitude of women in this generation toward collectivization was far from uniform. Those who had very little to lose or who felt isolated in a patriarchal household found that the collective farm offered the opportunity to get out from under the exclusive power of the household head and to work in groups together with women of the same age from other households. Although most women conceded that the earlier farm families had provided more support for women in their mothering role, some believed that the work of the collective farm was easier than under private farming. Tatiana Varfolomeeva encapsulated much of this feeling in speaking of life in her village in the years after she married in 1928. "We lived in private farming. Here in Nikitino the collective farm was established late because the people did not want to join under any circumstances, and they just stuck to their own farming until the authorities finally drove us into it by a combination of taxes and threats. The young people then got together and decided to create a collective farm. Then, after a time, when things settled down, it wasn't bad living on the collective farm. We got along working together, and our farm administration was good."⁴

It is important in evaluating such statements to keep in mind that in the memory of the informants, events in the long history of collectivization sometimes became collapsed. And, of course, they were likewise inflected by the concern over the

deteriorating conditions of post-Soviet life at the time most of the interviews were conducted. Tatiana Varfolomeeva's comment just cited was particularly clear (probably the more so because it was recorded as a field note and not in a tape-recorded conversation) in separating the disruptive onset of collectivization and the subsequent period of normalization. The testimony of Vera Belikova, which I recorded directly on tape, captured the same ideas in a set of signs that reveals some of the confusion of events and policies. She urged on me the task of telling the story of the suffering that Stalin had inflicted on her people. "Under Stalin we had nothing, no chickens, no eggs. There's an assignment for you. There wasn't any milk, the cow got sick from something, I sold her, and no milk! There, you see what we had to endure." Lenin was her man. He "reestablished life for everyone," she stressed, whereas the tsar took men into the army, maimed them, and sent them home without a pension, as happened to her father, who died young as a result of his wounds from World War I. In Vera's opinion, "the tsar was accursed," Lenin a good man, and Stalin a destroyer. This formula repeats a general evaluation we know from the post-World War II Harvard study of refugees from the Soviet Union that peasants thought of the 1920s as the best time of their lives, the time when they were the freest and most prosperous. But Vera also spoke of her collective farm with pride, noting that it usually produced a good supply of vegetables so that she could keep her children healthy and that new families had joined the collective to share in its prosperity.⁵ In these jumbled recollections we see an effort to distinguish between the brutality of the initial collectivization blamed on Stalin, a later period of improved food supply in the late 1930s and from the 1950s onward, and an implied criticism of the new conditions of the 1990s.

Whatever the stance toward collectivization, what most strongly characterized the women of this first generation was their adherence to religious norms and devotion to hard work, family, and pre-collectivization community values of mutual support and charity. These were women who in most cases married as virgins and rejected abortion as sinful and odious. Several spoke proudly of their natal families' faithfulness to the obligations of villagers to their neighbors and passing strangers. They praised their mothers for taking in pilgrims, feeding and lodging them, caring for neighbors in illness and pregnancy, in short, meeting their traditional community responsibilities.⁶ They understood their primary

obligations as the care of their families and accepted these responsibilities even when they were exceptionally onerous. Ekaterina Gerasimova, who had to bring up her three children on her own when her husband died in the war, also took on the support of the three children and an infirm old woman whom her sister left when she died in 1942. "The old woman was not from our family, but I fed them all....She died [after a short time] and everything was entirely on my shoulders... I brought them all up, all three..., plus my own three."⁷ Similarly, a Tatar woman from Mordovia, Sharifa Ialishева, and the Russian women Lina Buldakova, and Anastasia Vakhromeeva recounted how they stuck to their duty in those hard times. Sharifa had found satisfying work in the city but at her father's insistence had to give it up and return home to marry a village widower and bring up his children; in addition, she gave birth to and reared several of her own children. She felt she had no choice but to obey her father. Lina Buldakova, too, accepted her father's decision that she be married off to someone she did not know in order to quiet rumors harmful to her family. As for Anastasia, some years after losing her first husband and one of her two children in the early 1930s, she married a widower with four children of his own and had to bring up all five children by herself when this second husband died in the war. She took comfort in the praise of one of her step children who told her: "Mom, you're not a bad woman anyway. During the war we were little and left without our father, and you didn't abandon us, didn't walk away."⁸

The contributions that these women regarded as most important involved this loyalty to family, including respect for their elders and constancy in caring for their children and doing their work. Anastasia Shishanova sighed that her family was forced onto the collective farm and made to work without pay, and then the war came along and killed the men so that the women were left alone with the children and nothing to eat. It was a terrible life. But she did her duty, she worked constantly to support and bring up her children, whom she hardly got to see for the amount of work she had to do. Still, most important, "I gave birth to them, baptized them, and did everything in proper order." Marfa Malikova strove to be no worse than others, to lead a proper life by the standards of her community. "I lived like the others here. I feared God, worked hard for the children, and respected my elders. My husband thought that however many children came, that's

how many we would have. We would, he said, bring all of them up [*vsekh spokoim*]. But times were so harsh. There was collectivization, then war, and as a result we lost many [children]. My husband and I were saddened by this—such a good, wise husband and yet he had a bad life." And she continued, "It was hard then for everyone to rear children. After all, there were no nurseries or kindergartens. It was just good if someone had a grandma. And the older kids looked after the younger."⁹

Comments by her neighbor, Maria Malikova, reflected two attitudes common to women of this generation: an acceptance of their difficult lot and at the same time pride in what they were able to accomplish against long odds. "My life has been sorrowful. Not only has it been hard but I also suffered many abuses. A dream told me that it would be this way, that my life would be filled with sorrow but that it was necessary always to submit to the will of our Holy Mother. St. Nicholas told me this in a dream, and I was able to converse with him in this way. When things got really terrible, I would say: 'Well, whatever God brings, that's how it will have to be,' and then things got to feeling better. But however harsh the times were, I anyway brought up all my children and got them an education. Two of them live in Moscow, and now they bring the grandchildren to me, and I teach them their prayers and how to behave properly."¹⁰

In short, the women of the first generation presented themselves as sustained by religious belief and an abiding loyalty to family and the idea of work and home as the proper spheres for a peasant woman. They had to mediate between these values and the changing demands of the time, including especially the move to collectivized farming. This change had stripped their families of independent means of production, weakening the power of the household head and forcing the women to take on greater individual responsibilities. Even so, they continued to identify with the ideas and values of their youth. Their comments expressed an ethics of duty. Like their birthing and child care practices, their ethics were grounded in an earlier time, in the pre-Soviet collectivist values of the village order of the nineteenth century.¹¹

The Second Generation

The women of the second generation came to maturity in the new world of collectivized agriculture and the beginnings of Soviet education and indoctrination. Unlike their predecessors, who

entered adulthood before the upheavals of the 1930s and brought to this difficult time a set of loyalties and established rules of morality, the values and allegiances of the women of the second generation were less fixed. The radical shifts in government policy, terror, and personal loss left many of them without much faith in anyone or anything. These women were getting married and starting families from the late 1930s through and until just after the war years. They were therefore expected to do the work of the men of their generation who had been eliminated as kulaks or taken away to fight and die in the wars starting in the mid 1930s against Japan and continuing through World War II. At the same time, the government deprived women of the right to control their fertility and exhorted them to produce a bounty of children for the state. Though they were promised prenatal care, maternity homes, maternity leave, pediatric services, and child care facilities, these boons did not arrive in most villages until well after World War II and in many places not until the 1960s and 1970s.

The women of this second generation lived through a period of profound change in moral and social values. The power of male heads of family had decayed and been replaced by the less personal forces of Party leader and collective farm chairman, the first representatives of a would-be paternalist state that was supplanting the village's household-based patriarchal authority. Religious values were likewise under challenge from Soviet propaganda and schooling that encouraged young people to believe in their ability to transform their lives. The women responded to these messages. They were determined not to live as their mothers and grandmothers had: that is, in subordination to a household head, continuously pregnant through their childbearing years and producing a dozen or more children, many of whom would die in early childhood. When the government robbed them of the legal right to control their fertility, they defied the law and obtained underground abortions. This choice inflicted a high cost both physically and emotionally. Many women died from botched abortions. The survivors suffered physical pain from the unregulated procedures. They also witnessed the deaths of friends and neighbors and imprisonments of the women who provided the services. Finally, they had to deal with the moral sting of abortion because they were not entirely free of the religious scruples of earlier generations about this choice.

Not surprisingly, this generation, which was asked to make enormous sacrifices with no

reciprocity from the government or society, was also an angry generation. Most of them regarded their lives as not only hard but as unfair and unfulfilled. Their predecessors, the women of the first generation, also saw their lives as hard and the times as difficult, but they had a set of standards against which they could measure their sacrifices and draw meaning from them. They understood the value of their lives to lie in service to their families and their neighbors, respect for their elders, and faithfulness to the moral codes of their youth. The goals of the second generation were more personal and their ethics more utilitarian than duty-bound. They wanted a better life for themselves and their children, but work demands on the collective farms were punishing and poorly remunerated. The women had little time left over for their children and no means of fulfilling their aspirations for a better life. Nearly every woman in this cohort complained about the toll that work took on them and their children and about the failure to receive anything in return for their efforts. Zinaida Shumkova said, "I lived like a slave. They [the family she married into] were doing things, and I was at their beck and call. And I didn't see my own children. They reared them. My lot was to work. In the winter, I worked in the stables, in the summer in the fields. I didn't see [my children]." She went on to explain how her children, too, were exploited by her father-in-law, who crippled her son by forcing him to do work beyond his strength. Nina Novozhilova told a similar tale of constant work and separation from her children. "We got up at half past three in the morning and worked through until half past eleven at night. Sometimes even longer. That's how it was earlier. We had to tend to the livestock. And what kind of pay did I get? A pittance... There was a whole stable to look after... And I also worked in the factory... We worked and that was that. Not like they work today." Or take Antonina Larshina who, when she heard that I was writing about the life of mothers, described the trials of work and motherhood and then declared: "It wasn't any kind of a life. It was penal servitude... That's what you have to write down. That's what it was; tell it in that spirit."

The women of the second generation were inclined to be bitter about the lack of respect and appreciation for their sacrifices. They observed that their children and grandchildren enjoyed easier lives, at least until the recent collapse of the economy after perestroika and the fall of the Soviet Union. They spoke of how the younger generation received shorter hours of work,

privileges, and the benefits of state-supported medical, welfare, and transportation services. Most women, of course, did not begrudge their own offspring these boons. Indeed, they derived some consolation from the fact that their children had the time to visit them and to help them in small ways. Yet the women were critical of young people in general for what they regarded as their easy lives and especially the loose morals of the young women. It was shocking that they could see on television or read in magazines information about things these older women had not learned until they were married.¹²

Even more galling were the economic issues. The women of this second generation had suffered much and had to sacrifice their own aspirations for a better life. Finally, when they entered late middle age in the 1970s and 1980s, conditions began to improve. It was too late for these improvements to change their lives significantly, but they at least promised some security in old age. Then, suddenly, this comfort was denied them by the reform and fall of the Soviet Union. Anna Varfolomeeva (born in 1928) captured much of the experience of this generation in her testimony. She praised her mother for bringing the family through the war after the death of Anna's father at the front, and Anna extended this praise to others of that time. "In general, people earlier were better. If they had been the way people are now, they wouldn't have survived." Reflecting on the life of her mother, who had given birth to nine children and lost two in early childhood, Anna conceded that "of course, it wasn't as hard for me as for mama. In the stores you could buy everything, and I had only three children so that it was easier for me." At another point she observed that "our parents had really hard lives, and I too was somehow constantly plagued by something. It's true that in recent years [1970s and 1980s] things got a bit better. But now, again, we are not able to live but just to survive. And this is the legacy that's being given to my children. My middle son has four children, and his wife can't find work. It's difficult, of course.... Again, the young people don't have enough to survive on, and in the stores everything has vanished so that they have lost interest in having children."¹³ Others said much the same. "Life was really hard back then," Nina Novozhilova sighed. "And now again it is barely possible to live; here I am facing old age and again there's nothing much good. Thank God that my children are decent. They don't treat me badly and even bring me some things."¹⁴

The most striking characteristic of women of this generation is their lack of attachment to any institutions large or small. While some harbored nostalgia for the Brezhnev years when conditions briefly improved, the time before that was remembered as one of continuous suffering, enforced labor, separation from their children, and destruction of their families. And they rightly understood the new world of perestroika and capitalism to be a return to difficult economic conditions and a threat to their security in old age.

Only a few women, those who ended up reasonably well, were able to look back on their lives with any sense of satisfaction. Anna Kirsanova was one of the lucky ones. Though orphaned and illiterate in youth, she married a good man who helped her in her own tasks and even did baby sitting so that she could go to dances. Their children turned out well and got educated. At the time of the interview, Anna lived on her son's sizable farm and was visited by children and grandchildren from the city. She could feel that despite the terrible times in which she lived, she had done all that was in her power to do and had fulfilled the most important duties in life, namely, to work hard and to bring up her children.¹⁵ Praskovia Korotchenkova, like others of this generation, had suffered many blows, including losing her father to dekulakization, four difficult births, abortions, dire poverty, and the betrayals of her second husband. But she was able to accept calmly the things she did not have the power to change and derived satisfaction from her adherence to the traditional expectations that a peasant woman should work hard and care for her family. Despite her tribulations, the interviewer explained, "she persevered, reared her children and inculcated in them industry and respect for the family."

But most women of this second generation remained bitter. They had broken from the old ways of their mothers and grandmothers and expected to forge a new, more comfortable and individually fulfilling lives for themselves and their children. Their hopes were continually frustrated, first by a government policy denying them control of their fertility and then by war and reconstruction, which left them to rear their children alone under a harsh labor discipline and few, if any, government services. Their sacrifices and sufferings went unacknowledged and uncompensated. It is hardly surprising that they felt little allegiance to anything whether Party, government, work place or local community. Except for personal ties to their children and

neighbor women of their own age, many of them spoke of themselves as people cut loose from the surrounding world, forgotten and abandoned. They felt victimized by a cruel age that had not allowed them to form wider social bonds or develop a sense of believing in and belonging to something greater than their personal struggles for survival. The slogans and purposes of the government rang hollow for them.

Antonina Larshina, a member of this generation, told a story that could serve as a parable for her age mates. She grew up under the influence of her mother's traditional religious devotion. A corner of the house was filled from top to bottom with icons. But then Antonina's father joined the Communist Party in the 1930s, became "an inveterate communist," and decided he was going to remove all the icons. Antonina's mother protested furiously. "She nearly got into blows with him. But no matter, he cleaned out all of the icons anyway and to this day we don't know what he did with them." Her father later died in the war, and the family was never able to restore the symbols of their mother's faith. Antonina was to all appearances not especially interested in religion. Like other women of her age she still insisted on the importance of baptism, but religion did not seem to be an important part of her life. She also acknowledged some contributions made by the Communist regime. Recalling the famines and poverty into which she was born, she said: "How could we be developed people. Still and all, Soviet power brought us along a little bit. We at least started to know some geography. Where before we didn't know what was north and what was south."¹⁶ In short, Antonina felt some nostalgia for the religious symbols of her youth and her mother's devotion to them, and she also recognized some contributions of the Communist regime embraced by her father. But she registered no allegiance to either set of beliefs.

Anna Zueva, the medic from Novgorod province and a woman about the same age as Antonina Larshina, expressed the same cynicism about the belief systems of her time. Her family was religious and mingled in its faith many of the Christian and pre-Christian figures common to Russian popular belief. The following story she related contains elements of the basic conversion tale told by many initiates in the Communist Party and by village correspondents.¹⁷ Anna undoubtedly borrowed from such formulations while also revealing why she saw herself as emancipated from all belief systems. "In the 1930s," she said, "I was uneducated. Until age ten, I was brought up to

believe in devils, unclean powers, witches and such. Well, there were soothsayers and, it goes without saying, they could do anything. All kinds of old women. Old women could do whatever: inflict the evil eye, carry away livestock, and destroy the harvest. And, they'd say, they would fly around on brooms in the night, fly down the chimney and harm your neighbor.... But then at some point I began to think through these things and came to the conclusion that it was all made up. So, since then I have lived my whole life believing in nothing." Anna told another story from about the same time of how the communist school system helped free her from religious ideas and how she used a student newspaper to mount a small rebellion. "Our mama prayed to God and we all had get down on our knees every night before bed and say our prayers. This was before the 1930s. Well, it was also required that once a year we went to confession. So, we had to miss school for two days. In Gorodno there was a church and we'd go there to say confession. We stayed overnight with an aunt, and on the next day we would take communion and then go home cleansed. One time I did this, I guess it was when I was in the fourth grade, mama sent me. When I got back, I got a 'D' on my exam. So, I wrote a comment on this for the wall newspaper and then they released it. I wrote it all down how I went [to the church]. And the title they placed on the article was 'God Is No Help.' They hung out the newspaper before the school parents' assembly, read it and said: 'Now, you're going to catch it, when your mom comes to the meeting and reads this comment.'" I asked some questions about how this all was done, but Anna got me back to the main point. "The fact was that I got a 'D' on the arithmetic exam and out of resentment I wrote this comment about how God is no help.... Already at that time I had started to protest in my soul. I was about 10 years old at the time, probably only about ten, and I came to the conclusion that God was no help, and what you had to do was use your own head."¹⁸ Anna Zueva's sense of identity and purpose came as much as anything from her service as a medic with the partisans behind German lines in World War II and her subsequent career as a medical officer in her village. She had been married to the collective farm chairman and expressed some appreciation for the positive achievements of the Stalin regime, more than most people were willing to admit at the time I was conducting the interview. This was not surprising, since the technical schools promoted by that regime provided the education for Anna. She was the first person in her family to get more than

village schooling and was able to achieve professional status in one generation. Her daughter made it to the next step by becoming a doctor in a nearby city. Even so, Anna was not a spokesperson for the Communist system; she acknowledged its costs, and kept her own counsel and view of the world. To the extent it was systematic, this view was consonant, it is true, with the secular, scientific view advanced by Marxism. But Anna, as she often emphasized, was not a believer in any systems.

The women of this generation had to mediate between the strict norms of their parents' generation and their own schooling that rejected much of what their parents believed. They also accepted ideas of the new regime about transforming their lives and acted on them in defiance of that same regime's pronatalist policies. So, while their identities were shaped in part by their uncompensated sacrifices and their rejection of both the old and the new, it cannot be said that they portrayed themselves solely as victims. Some women derived satisfaction from their ability to negotiate the demands of both the old world and the new, to form their own counsel and independently make the agonizing and perilous decisions that allowed them a measure of control over their lives. Although they did not describe their defiance of the law as political, their actions had political effect. The women forced repeal of the law against abortion and an increase in social benefits for rural women. In this sense, these women who felt alienated and abandoned by government were actually more engaged with it than were their predecessors. They were engaged in a struggle to assert their individual needs against preferences defined by the state.

The Third Generation

Women of the third generation were born in the 1930s and afterward and did not start building their families until after the death of Stalin. By this time, conditions in the countryside had begun to improve, girls were receiving full elementary education, and some government services were reaching the village. The ban on abortion was lifted in 1955. Provided there was a hospital within reach, village women of the third generation had the opportunity to restrict their fertility safely through hospital abortions, and they felt more comfortable emotionally and morally about this option than had their predecessors. Maternity benefits accorded state workers were extended in the mid-1960s to collective farm women. Work discipline on the collective farms and in rural

factories was also becoming less punishing. These improvements gave mothers the option of spending more time with their children. The government was at last acknowledging the contributions that farm women made and providing some reciprocity in terms of benefits. The women of the third generation had become in some measure "sovietized," that is included in the social contract that offered workers social assistance and security in return for acceptance of the system.

Valentina Lopatkina from the Moscow province village of Tsarevo gave birth to twins, Lena and Sergei, in 1958 in a hospital in the town of Pushkino. She had to manage them on her own. Her mother-in-law was not able to help, her husband worked jobs far from home, and hiring a nanny for twins would have cost Valentina's entire paycheck. Valentina's problem was that Lena was colicky for several months, screaming and upsetting the in-laws, until Valentina in utter exhaustion was driven to the brink of madness. "I didn't know what I was going to do, didn't know," she told me. "I didn't know what I could do [to stop the screaming]. Should I smother them both, or smother just the one. Or should I just go hang myself instead. Oi! Oi! I grabbed [Lena] so hard... I took her and I threw her. And she knows about this. How many times I've told her. 'Lenka, I nearly smothered you to death.' I was utterly exhausted. I threw her down so hard. I pressed a pillow onto her and was thinking, 'Well, go ahead and choke to death.' Because I had had it." But Valentina stopped herself in time and decided to leave Lena with a neighbor while she traveled with Sergei to her husband. She recounted how she carried Sergei through a snowstorm many miles to where her husband was working. The workers thought that she had lost her mind, but they took pity and the work council released her husband and allowed him thereafter to work close to home where he could help with the children when needed. Valentina was able to stay at home with the children for three and a half years until they were old enough to be placed in a week-long kindergarten at a state farm far from her village.¹⁹ Her story makes clear that personal needs were at last being given consideration by the authorities and that some child care services, if not yet nurseries for the very young and if not yet close to home, were beginning by the early 1960s to make an appearance in the countryside.

Antonina Abramova from the Tambov villages was the same age as Valentina. Antonina had her first child in 1957; she was widowed, remarried,

and then gave birth a second time in 1970. Both children were born in medical facilities, the first in a village maternity home, the second in a city hospital. She received two and a half months maternity leave for the first child and more time for the second. The collective farm offered pregnant women lighter work, but Antonina claimed not to have spared herself; she performed heavy labor right to the end of pregnancy. Like Valentina, she benefited from the new medical services and job-related assistance that were beginning to ease the reproductive lives of rural women. Though she had some complaints about the impersonal treatment in maternity wards, still Antonina looked back on this period appreciatively and compared it favorably to the post-Soviet regime, which she disliked intensely and wished to see destroyed. "Earlier, people treated one another better, whereas in recent times they have become embittered and mean. Village life is very hard now and doesn't offer a ray of hope. Under the communists, things were a whole lot better. We had a lot of people on the collective farm, and the farms generally were quite strong. You knew that if you worked hard, you'd get a living wage. But now no one is certain of anything."²⁰

As a final example, Antonina Ptichnikova, one of the youngest of our informants, was born in 1940 and reared her children in the 1960s and 1970s when conditions had improved substantially. Compared to the lives of the women in the first and second generations, hers seems much more manageable and was certainly not touched by tragedy and privation. Even so, Antonina described it as grueling. She worked in a rural factory and took her two children each day to a kindergarten on the way to work. "It was very hard," she recounted, "that a woman had to work for eight hours... You couldn't leave even for an hour. That's how it was. And at work it was hard. I worked in the shop as a technician. Then I'd go home, and there were two kids and my husband and that. This is how life went by for me, so that...well, I think it was hard, very hard." The comparison here is clearly not to her predecessors who worked twelve and fourteen hour days at heavy farm labor and had to leave their children unsupervised but to the younger people of recent years who had more freedom to skip work and longer maternity leaves and other benefits. It should also be kept in mind that, according to Nancy Ries, this type of lament was a standard conversational element during this time of change, its purpose being to stake a claim on the sympathy of the listener and validate rights to compensation

that the speaker now had some doubts would be honored by the government.²¹

After reciting this lament, Antonina continued on a different note, one that contrasted a number of positive sides of the Brezhnev era, which had been at the center of her life, with the situation at the time of the interview. "One thing was good then, which nowadays I don't like, for example, how it is here. That is, at least I knew that my children [were]... always, so to say, at some appointed place whether in the kindergarten or at camp." She continued: "Second, I always had work, and no one could ever...lay me off. Never. That's not the way it is now. Things are running in an entirely different direction now... Now they can let you go and they can do anything they want to you. But when we were living, that's under socialism, the thing that we felt good about was that I knew that I would always have a salary, ... on which I could, so to say, live. That is, well, in the sense of getting food. We had a normal situation... Of course, it wasn't luxurious, not at all. But housing, food and work you had for sure. And the children were taken care of. That is, we never worried that you wouldn't have a place to live. So, on that level, things were good. And now what's going to happen no one knows."

Antonina Ptichnikova likewise praised the equality of those times. Everyone lived about the same, she remarked. Workers and engineers, the difference was not great. She had heard some of the recent revelations about how well the top people lived, but the local Party people were not like that, she asserted. "Before, we all lived about the same," and "in any case, we ate much better than we do now." She also expressed concern about the change in health care, something they had never worried about before. They had their free clinics, she related, and "if you needed a complicated operation, they would send you to a special institute in Moscow." But now medical services were costing the users. "We don't have money for medical care," she complained. "We weren't accustomed to needing it... we didn't save up."²²

For the cohort of Valentina Lopatkina, Antonina Abramova, and Antonina Ptichnikova, the primary historical reference was the one period of comparative prosperity in Soviet rural life, the last Khrushchev years and especially the Brezhnev era. They suffered some privation in their childhood and knew something of the misery and losses that touched women of earlier generations, but their own experience of courtship, marriage, childbearing and child rearing fell into better

times. They felt allegiance to the regime that had provided a life of job security, social benefits, and a comfortable retirement, and they resented the loss of this security just as they were entering their declining years.

To sum up the experience and stance of the three generations, the first built their lives around the value of hard work, and loyalty to family and to the religious institutions and ideas of their childhood. Allegiance to these institutions and ideas remained and guided them through the terrible ordeals and losses that inevitably touched rural women in twentieth-century Russia. Despite their losses, they retained a coherent sense of what made their lives worthwhile. The second generation is the most confused, angry, and bitter: and not surprisingly, as these women had greater aspirations than the older women, were continuously frustrated in their hopes, were required to sweat and slave on factories and farms, to sacrifice everything, and received very little in return. Now they face the privations of post-Soviet life. What saved some of them from despair was their identity as independent actors who had been able to merge the old and the new, defy the authorities in their reproductive decisions, protect the secret practice of their persecuted abortionists and healers, in short, to form a bond with their female age mates in opposition to the unreasonable demands of the authorities. The third generation shared in some of the boons of Soviet society. Medical and some social services reached the countryside in time to assist them in their childbearing and child rearing. Their work lives, while arduous, were considerably easier than those of their mothers and grandmothers. They naturally felt allegiance to the Soviet system, which acknowledged and compensated their work contributions. Now that it is gone, they face an anxious and uncertain future. At the time of the interviews, they had not fully confronted the difficulties of the new, leaner times. It is difficult to say how well they will negotiate the tension between their self-identity as "sovietized" rural women entitled to some reciprocity from the government and the government's retreat from such obligations.

Notes

- ¹. Zukhra Pozdniakova, interview by Ransel, Krasnoe Selo, Leningrad province, April, 20, 1999.
- ². Ekaterina Gerasimova, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Tsarevo, Moscow province, June 6, 1993.
- ³. See the stories of Lina Buldakova, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Vvedenskoe, Moscow province, June 5, 1993; Sharifa Ialisheva, interview by Ransel,

Leningrad, April 21, 1990; Efrosinia Ruleva, interview by Listova, Buda, Ugransk raion, Briansk province, summer 1993; and Women in Udel'nyi Park #2, interview by Shapovalova and Ransel, Leningrad, May 12, 1990.

⁴. Tatiana Varfolomeeva, interview by Listova, Nikitino, El'ninsk raion, Smolensk province, summer 1993. See also Praskovia Krivolopova, interview by Listova, Inakovka 2, Tambov province, summer 1994.

⁵. Vera Belikova, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Nazarovo, Moscow province, June 6, 1993.

⁶. See, among others, the testimony of Lina Buldakova, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Vvedenskoe, Moscow province, June 5, 1993; Elizaveta Nikolaeva, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Tsarevo, Moscow province, June 6, 1993; and Maria Somova, interview by Listova, Pakhotnyi Ugol, Tambov province, summer 1994.

⁷. Fortunately, she owned two cows, which were a great help in feeding so many children. Ekaterina Gerasimova, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Tsarevo, Moscow province, June 6, 1993.

⁸. Sharifa Ialisheva, interview by Ransel, April 21, 1990, Leningrad. Lina Buldakova, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Vvedenskoe, Moscow province, June 5, 1993. Anastasia Vakhromeeva, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Kablukovo, Moscow province, June 7, 1993.

⁹. Marfa Malikova, interview by Listova, Inakovka 1, Tambov province, summer 1994.

¹⁰. Maria Malikova, interview by Listova, Inakovka 1, Tambov province, summer 1994.

¹¹. Thanks go to Nanette Funk, a discussant at the Soyuz conference, for the formulation in these final two sentences.

¹². See, among others, Women in Udel'nyi Park, #1 and #2, interviews by Shapovalova and Ransel, Leningrad, May 12, 1990; Anna Konobievskaja, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Zhukovka, Moscow province, June 7, 1993.

¹³. Indeed, at the time of the interview, the stores in the market center of Korobets were altogether empty, noted the interviewer. Anna Varfolomeeva, interview by Listova, Nikitino, Tambov province, summer 1994.

¹⁴. Nina Novozhilova, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Nazarovo, Moscow province, June 6, 1993.

¹⁵. Anna Kirsanova, interview by Listova, Vititni, El'ninsk raion, Smolensk province, summer 1993.

¹⁶. Antonina Larshina, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Orlovo, Moscow province, June 8, 1993.

¹⁷. See chapter 2 of *Village Mothers: Three Generations of Change in Russia and Tataria*.

¹⁸. Anna Zueva, interview by Ransel, Chernaia, Batetskii raion, Novgorod province, May 24-26, 1990.

¹⁹. Valentina Lopatkina, interview by Glazunova and Ransel, Tsarevo, Moscow province, June 6, 1993.

²⁰. Antonina Abramova, interview by Listova, Inakovka 2, Tambov province, summer 1994.

²¹. Nancy Ries, *Russian Talk*, esp. chapter 3.

²². Antonina Ptichnikova, interview by Glazunova and

Ransel, Kablukovo, Moscow province, June 8, 1993.