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This book by Vladimir Bezgin is devoted to the study of the daily rural lives of Russian peasant women during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The everyday lives of people who lived in the past has become a common subject of interest in historical anthropology. It has gained huge popularity among researchers and studies have been conducted worldwide. The classic works of Carlo Ginzburg (The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller. Baltimore 1980; The Night Battles. Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Baltimore 1983) and Nathalie Zemon-Davis (Women on the Margins. Three Seventeenth-Century Lives. Cambridge, MA 1995; The Return of Martin Guerre. Cambridge, MA 1983) are good examples of this field of investigation into issues of everyday life. Scholars using this methodology practice what Clifford Geertz called “thick description” as a way of demonstrating the multiplicity and variety of opportunities that existed for peoples living in the past, even within the context of closed systems. In their research, scholars often, and quite correctly refute stories based on larger social groups such as classes. The protagonists for historians of this type are individuals, and specifically those who have particular biographies, experiences, and wishes. Another way of narrating the stories of people who lived in the past is to paint a sort of collective portrait drawn from a kaleidoscope of scattered, often contradictory, testimonies. Bezgin’s book takes this approach.

The rural women from the Russian provinces who are described in the book are portrayed as a universal category. Their lives, as Bezgin depicts them, did not differ greatly across regions or over time. The author uses sources that span a long period of time and a large amount of space – ranging from Arkhangel’sk to Voronezh and from the post-reform 1870s to 1914. At the same time, the category of “empire”, which is used in the title of the book and which has a multiplicity of associations and meanings, remains unclear. The book is not about the empire at all but rather about one aspect of it: the lives of two types of peasant living in the empire’s vaguely defined geographic area, in other words, Russia. The two categories of peasants are serfs who were emancipated in 1861 and state peasants who never belonged to a landowner. The specifics of their circumstances are not elucidated by the author.

Recent social research includes a number of books investigating different aspects of the lives of Russian peasant women. Unfortunately, the author completely neglects to mention any of these books (e. g. Laura J. Olson / Svetlana Adonyeva: The Worlds of Russian Village Women. Tradition, Transgression, Compromise. Madison, WI 2012; Natalia
According to Bezgin, the everyday life of a Russian peasant included gender-related practices, which he describes in 16 sections and combines into three unequal parts entitled: “In the Family”, “In the World”, and “From the Evil One”. In the first part, he describes the life cycle of the ‘average’ peasant woman in the central regions of Russia and the main milestones in her life: childhood, marriage, childbirth, and old age, as well as issues around property and family relations. The second section includes chapters on litigation, public punishment, and the participation of women in rural protests. The third part includes chapters describing crimes against women and the practices of women who were marginalized within village communities. The practices Bezgin refers to include prostitution, drunkenness, and suicide.

The book is divided into different parts describing the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ lives of peasant women. The author himself acknowledges that this division is artificial, noting that, at the turn of the century, the boundary between the private and the public or common realm was often blurred (p. 5). At the same time, however, he does not offer any alternative concepts or explanations as to why he framed his study in the way he did or why he chose this particular set of topics as the basis for exploring women’s everyday life. For instance, he decides to write about sexual contacts between some peasant women and their fathers-in-law, yet he neglects to mention, say, women’s crafts and handicrafts. It is also not clear how (and whether) women’s daily lives differed, if their biographies or circumstances were ‘atypical’. How were the everyday lives of disabled women, widows or women abandoned by their husbands due to urban migration, for instance? The author makes no references to these scenarios. However, as many researchers have noted, there were dynamic changes in the rural world at the turn of the century, when significant transformation was a distinctive feature of the time (e.g. V. P. Danilov: Sud’by sel’skogo khoziaistva v Rossii (1861–2001), in: Istoriia krest’ianstva v Rossii v XX veke. Izbrannye trudy. V dvukh chast’akh. Moskva 2011, pp. 630–648). In this sense, the key research question should in fact be: What was a ‘typical’ biography of a Russian peasant woman at the turn of the century? Is it only the routine created by traditional roles, as described by the author of the study, that makes her typical? Or is it her specific biography? And what happens when her biography is filled with extraordinary events such as devastation, relocation, employment, and so on? Events like this strongly influence everyday life. Unfortunately, none of these critical points feature in this book. The author describes a universal life cycle, which does not tell us anything about a particular place at a particular time. All the important changes that occurred
within the lives of peasant women during the late 19th and early 20th centuries remain peripheral in this book.

Another important issue leaves this book open to criticism. This is the broader theoretical and methodological question of how a “women’s history” should be written. What does it mean to write social history through the lens of gender? For experts specializing in gender studies, gender is distinct from biological sex. Gender is a social concept and not simply the physical difference between men and women (Raewyn W. Connell: Gender. Cambridge 2002). Gender is defined and assigned meaning through social practices and social roles in a given society. Most of these meanings revolve around issues of power and hierarchy, whether in the local communities or in the context of the country at large. The main category that Bezgin focuses on in his work is female physiology and physicality, not gender. Perhaps this is why he exhibits such strong interest in subjects such as women’s sexual relations, cohabitation with older relatives of their husband (p. 76), women’s masturbation (p. 133), and rape (pp. 147–167). It is striking that the author devotes 20 pages of his text just to recounting court documents about rape. He uses direct quotes accompanied by descriptions of scenes of rape. However, he does not explain what these scenes illustrate. He does not elaborate on what claims the documents are supposed to confirm or refute. How can these scenes help readers understand rural daily life? It seems that the author considers rape a key component of a “women’s history” of 19th-century Russia, and yet he does not appear to know how to conceptualize it. If he had placed questions about the distribution of power in rural society and the gender roles associated with this at the heart of his investigation, then the impact and meaning of these 20 pages would have been completely different. The existing scholarly literature presents a myriad of ways that researchers can interpret such data (e.g. Natal’ia Pushkareva: Bytovoe nasilie v istorii rossiiskoi povsednevnosti (XI–XXI vekov). S.-Peterburg 2012).

Thus, this book reduces the history of rural women – as stated in the title – to a description of the collective biography of Russian peasant women during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was written in a specific light and without regard for or attention to the changes that occurred in women’s lives during this era of rapid social and economic transformation. In this sense, the answer to the question of how ‘external’ events in Russian history influenced the ‘internal’, everyday lives of peasant women is not clear. Although in the book’s conclusion the author draws a connection between the “deformation of moral principles” of the peasant women with the modernization processes in the village, the readers have to work hard to find a confirmation of this thesis in the text. Finally, the author’s methodological approach to women lacks any connection to social and gender theory, making this monograph one of the worst examples of how historians write about women. His approach is exruciating for readers and definitely does not help them understand how Russian peasant women lived their
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Der Herausforderung, diese Geschichte einem Massenpublikum bekannt zu machen, stellten sich die Herausgeber sowie Autoren und Autorinnen dieses TV-Begleitbandes, der durch eine Chronologie zur deutsch-polnischen Beziehungsgeschichte und eine Auswahlbibliografie abgerundet wird. Dies kann nur mit der Materie sehr vertrauten Autorinnen und Autoren gelingen, so dass die TV-Produzenten für die Beiträge des Bandes ausgewiesene Experten und Expertinnen heranzogen.

Zeichnet sich dieses Genre einerseits durch den Verzicht eines umfangreichen wissenschaftlichen Apparates aus, so besticht die Vielfalt der abgedruckten Materialien wie neu gezeichnete Karten, neuer und ältere Fotografien und Reproduktionen von älteren Gemälden. Als Begleitpublikation konzipiert, beinhaltet der anzuzeigende Band...