

Cambridge University Press

0521566215 - Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 - Barbara Alpern Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

In the half century between the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the outbreak of World War I, it remained a very long way from the village to the city. Footpaths or unpaved, rutted roads connected peasant villages scattered over Russia's vast expanses. Following decades of rapid expansion, railroads still linked only the most substantial provincial towns to major urban centers in the early years of the twentieth century. The estate in Tver' province where Nina Berberova (born 1901) spent her childhood was seventy miles from the nearest railroad station. "These were grim, wretched wild places," she remembered. "Wolves and bears roamed the forests; fields stretched on for a hundred miles. The horizon was straight and hard, and paths, often only log paths, led into the limitless distance, where only skylarks sang their song."¹ From such remote places the peasant migrant would have to travel for days on foot or, if fortunate, by horse-drawn cart before she could reach a railroad station. And a migrant had to traverse other and no less formidable distances to live in a major urban center. The city offered another sort of life than she had known in her village. Urban dwellers looked different: The men's hair was cut city-fashion, instead of under a bowl, and their shirts were worn inside instead of outside their pants. Almost everyone wore factory-made fabrics even when they went to work, whereas villagers continued to wear homespun except on special occasions. In the city, people timed their work by the clock, rather than by the sun and the seasons as they did in the village. The pace of urban life was much faster and the noise level higher. Villagers spent their days amidst familiar faces, engaging in activities that had engaged their mothers and grandmothers before them, while in the city they encountered strangers whose ways appeared equally strange.

In the decades after the emancipation of the serfs, increasing numbers of peasant women and men traversed these distances. The terms of the emancipation of the serfs combined with other changes to intensify greatly the

1 Nina Berberova, *The Italics Are Mine* (New York, 1969), 10.

Cambridge University Press

0521566215 - Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 - Barbara Alpern Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Between the fields and the city

peasants' need for cash. The emancipation granted many peasants less land than they had tilled in the days of serfdom and required all but the recipients of paupers' allotments to redeem the land over a period of forty-nine years, and at a rate that often exceeded its market value. In addition to redemption payments, peasants owed taxes to the state and dues to support the work of the local elective self-government, the *zemstvo*. Explosive population growth between 1861 and 1905 forced peasants to support these fiscal obligations on a declining amount of land per capita: By 1900, the average peasant's allotment had shrunk by over a third.

The emancipation also signaled the start of Russia's industrial revolution. Industrialization proceeded slowly in the 1860s and 1870s, grew rapidly in the 1890s and then again in the years prior to World War I. Although it took place at the initiative of an autocratic state, rather than an entrepreneurial class, in many respects, Russia's industrialization resembled the process that England had experienced beginning in the late eighteenth century and Western Europe several decades later. Machinery took over the production of goods that people had formerly made by hand, destroying many of the cottage industries that had enabled peasants to supplement agricultural income in their villages. As a result, increasing numbers of people left the place of their birth to earn their living laboring in factories and mills. Russia's industrialization was also distinctive, however. The process began much later than it had in the West, and it proceeded far more rapidly and unevenly and against the background of a peasant way of life that had remained little changed for centuries. To be sure, recent scholarly work has demonstrated the significance of proto-industrialization even under serfdom. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, thousands of peasants in hundreds of villages wove silk, linen, or cotton, while thousands more tanned hides and worked metal for sale on the market.² Nevertheless, on the eve of emancipation, proto-industrial production constituted only a tiny share of the national economy.³ Most proto-industrial workers continued to shift between agriculture and domestic production and to remain within the relatively insular world of the Russian village. This was especially true for women, who were far less likely than men to travel elsewhere to market goods or search for work. For the vast majority of peasants, Russia's industrialization would bring dramatic, sometimes wrenching change.

2 Edgar Melton has surveyed this scholarship and produced his own contribution to it in "Proto-Industrialization, Serf Agriculture, and Agrarian Social Structure: Two Estates in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *Past and Present*, no. 115 (May 1987): 69–106.

3 *Ibid.*, 80.

Cambridge University Press

0521566215 - Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 - Barbara Alpern Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Introduction**

3

Labor force statistics give a sense of pace and numbers. Between 1887 and 1900, over a million people entered the industrial labor force more than doubling the number of workers. Millions more found work in artisanal trades, in service, in construction, and in other sectors of the expanding economy. In 1897, when Russia's first national census was conducted, there were 6.4 million hired workers.⁴ Most of these workers derived from peasant villages. In the Central Industrial Region, where outmigration for wages was at its most intense, one of every four or five villagers was off working elsewhere by the early twentieth century. In Western Europe, too, peasants had supplied a large proportion of the workforce in the early stages of industrialization. However, in the West the path from village to city or factory was usually a one-way street, whereas in Russia, all but a few migrants went back as well as forth. Maintaining their village ties, sending a portion of their wages back to their families, migrants remained away from home for a few months or years; then they returned for good to their villages. The Stolypin reforms of 1906–7 changed this situation to some extent. The reforms were aimed at creating a strong, independent capitalist peasantry that would serve as a source of stability in the countryside. They enabled peasants more easily to sever their ties with their villages and, in some cases, deprived young peasant men of their claims to family allotments and, consequently, of their incentive to return home. While historians differ concerning the overall impact, there can be no question that the reforms increased the flow of peasants from the village and made it more likely that migration would be a one-way trip.

Industrialization and urbanization profoundly affected the peasant way of life. In Russia, the peasant household was also a family economy in the sense that every able-bodied member, including children, worked to ensure that the family household survived. Both family household and village were patriarchal in organization: Elders held power over the young and men held power over women. In the family household, males as well as females remained subject to the father's will so long as the father lived, and he deployed their labor and disposed of their earnings according to household need. The proliferation of capitalist wage relations and the expansion of industrial employment challenged these well-established power relations. Even as wage migration to distant places provided the cash that helped to sustain the peasant family economy, it loosened patriarchal control of the

4 Victoria Bonnell, ed. *The Russian Worker: Life and Labor under the Tsarist Regime* (Berkeley, Calif., 1983), 1–2.

Cambridge University Press

0521566215 - Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 - Barbara Alpern Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Between the fields and the city

wage earner. Moreover, urban experiences that broadened horizons and heightened expectations sometimes put the migrant at odds with the family collective, sometimes made it more difficult to merge that individual's "I" into the "we" of family or village life. As I hope to demonstrate in the following pages, changes that slackened the hold of the patriarchal family provided new opportunities for peasant women, but they also rendered women more economically and personally vulnerable.

The significance and consequences of peasant women's migration is the subject of this book. It will follow migrants as they moved between the fields and the factories and cities, looking at the peasantry from which they derived as well as at the urban lower class that they joined. The first part of the book offers an examination of the peasant way of life in villages of the Central Industrial Region, Russia's most "modern" region and the region that the greatest number of peasants left in search of wages.⁵ The second part explores migrant women's experiences in the city and belongs to a growing body of literature that treats the formation of the Russian working class, although unlike the bulk of this literature, it concentrates on the experience of women. Historians of Russia have long debated the extent to which peasant migration from village to city constituted a break with the past. I want to address this question too and to ask what such a break might mean to women. But I will also look in the other direction, examining the ways that the migration of women and men affected the villages they left behind. Like its title, this study will straddle two worlds.

So did many of the women and men who populate its pages. Peasant practices helped migrants to adapt to urban life: They traveled along well-trodden paths to the city, initially received help from or resided with kinfolk or people from their locale (*zemliaki*); and they perceived the world they encountered through the prism of their peasant past. Yet, at least in the eyes of fellow villagers, the time they spent in the city changed many migrants. The city figured ambiguously in the mental landscape of Russia's peasants: It offered cash and goods the village needed, but in an unhealthy environment of freedom and license. Young people, young women in particular, risked becoming "spoiled" there. Such fears reflected the contradictory character of wage migration to a major urban center.

The effect of wage migration on the peasant world has received comparatively little attention from historians writing in English. Instead, studies of

5 The provinces of the Central Industrial Region were Tver', Jaroslavl', Moscow, Vladimir, Kostroma, and Nizhnii Novgorod.

Cambridge University Press

0521566215 - Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 - Barbara Alpern Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Introduction**

5

peasant life emphasize the tenacity of custom and tradition and stress continuity over change. This study aims to adjust rather than to challenge this overall picture by drawing attention to some of the ways that migration affected the village and gender mediated change. In order to identify constituencies for change in the village, in the first four chapters that treat the peasantry I have heeded peasant women's discordant voices far more closely than their fellow villagers usually did. Documentation of women's discontent is available from both published and archival sources. Peasant women could bring their grievances to cantonal (*volost'*) courts, administered by the peasants themselves; if they failed to find satisfaction, they had the right to appeal to civil authorities in the district or provincial committees that administered peasant affairs, or even to petition the tsar, although relatively few women availed themselves of these possibilities. Some married women simply took matters into their own hands and fled households where they felt unhappy. If a husband attempted to bring a wife home again or, much more rarely, brought suit for separation or divorce, the woman had a chance to tell her own side of the story. In my quest for women's voices, I will draw extensively on *volost'* court cases, on petitions to the authorities, and on transcripts of divorce testimonies. The voices that emerge are those of a small minority of peasant women, who nevertheless offer an important perspective on village life. Unwilling or unable to put up with situations or treatment that others managed to accept, they expose the fault lines of peasant society, the places where it might crack under pressure.

Such women were also the most likely to respond as individuals to the siren song of the city and to seek the alternative life that it offered. They were not, however, the majority of women migrants, who were themselves a small minority of peasant women. As late as 1910, only a fraction of peasant women left the village for the city. And most of those who did were women on the margins, widows and spinsters, or women from impoverished households who left for family, not individual, reasons: to relieve the family of an unnecessary pair of hands and a mouth it could not feed; to gain additional resources for the family economy; to accompany a husband who worked elsewhere. Unskilled, usually illiterate, most of them found semidependent positions as servants, cooks, or nursemaids, or they held jobs in industries where they earned about half of what men did, wages that put them at or below subsistence level. Often, the greater a woman's independence from village and kin, the more economically vulnerable she became. I will explore the effect of economic and social circumstances on single women's efforts to shape lives for themselves in the city, by examining illegitimacy (Chapter 5)

Cambridge University Press

0521566215 - *Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914* - Barbara Alpern Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Between the fields and the city

and prostitution (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 looks at a relative rarity, the co-habiting working-class family in the city.

Like the women and men they study, the following chapters will sometimes weave back and forth between the village and the city. The organization of this book is more thematic than chronological. The examination of village life begins in 1861, with the emancipation of the serfs, but the chapters on the city focus on a somewhat later period, from 1880 to 1914, when migration from village to city had become quite substantial. The story stops at the outbreak of World War I, which changed the picture dramatically by sending millions of men off to war and bringing unprecedented numbers of their wives, sisters, and daughters to the city. I have chosen to present my material in the form of case studies and to focus on particular regions, problems, and aspects of women's lives, rather than to attempt a comprehensive history of peasant women as they moved between the village and the city. Among other important topics, the role of religion in peasant women's lives remains unexplored. The primary sources I read had almost nothing to say about it, and I found few secondary works that treated the subject to my satisfaction. Nevertheless, certain themes will recur: One is the flexibility with which patriarchal village structures adapted to economic and social change; another is the ambiguous effect of such change on women themselves. Some women experienced it as opportunity, others as loss. Their story has not been told before; it puts the history we thought we knew into a different perspective.

Cambridge University Press

0521566215 - Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 - Barbara Alpern Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1. Patriarchy and its discontents

The world of the Russian peasant was harsh, and peasant life both precarious and extraordinarily demanding. Intense, virtually endless toil was necessary although not always sufficient to ensure survival. Family members had to cooperate: Pooling their labor as family groups enabled peasants to subsist in an environment where the weather was unreliable and the land increasingly inadequate to feed the humans who depended upon it for their livelihood. The debate continues over the extent of peasant poverty in the decades following the emancipation.¹ However, no one seriously doubts that peasants had to struggle, sometimes desperately, for survival or that the family provided a key to their success. This chapter will consider what these circumstances meant to women. It will present an overview of peasant women's lives, focusing on the commonalities in women's position across rural Russia and the patriarchal structures that continued to dominate peasant life at least until 1905.

At the center of virtually every woman's life, as of every man's, was the family, the "most significant and indispensable condition of life for every peasant," in the words of the Russian ethnographer M.M. Gromyko.² Family households consisted of related (and occasionally unrelated) individuals. Their size and composition varied cyclically as well as according to region; however, economically "strong" households tended to be complex in structure, consisting of blood relatives spanning two or three generations. Family households belonged to a larger peasant community, whose members shared ownership of the land and responsibility for paying the dues and obligations

1 For two recent and opposing perspectives on this longstanding debate, see Elvira Wilbur, "Peasant Poverty in Theory and Practice: A View from Russia's 'Impoverished Center' at the End of the Nineteenth Century," and Stephen G. Wheatcroft, "Crises and the Condition of the Peasantry in Late Imperial Russia," both in *Peasant Economy, Culture, and Politics of European Russia, 1800–1921*, ed. Esther Kingston-Mann and Timothy Mixer (Princeton, N.J., 1991), 101–27, 128–72.

2 M.M. Gromyko, *Traditsionnye normy povedeniia i formy obshcheniia russkikh krest'ian xix v.* (Moscow, 1986), 261.

Cambridge University Press

0521566215 - Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 - Barbara Alpern Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 **Between the fields and the city**

exacted by state and local officials. The terms of the emancipation granted these communities substantial authority over their members, supplementing the customary controls the community had long exercised. Peasant communities had a variety of means at their disposal to enforce strict adherence to shared norms and values. Some were informal, such as ritual shaming practices resembling the charivari, gossip, and the politics of reputation. Others had a more formal character. The peasant assembly (*skhod*) and, especially, cantonal (*volost'*) courts adjudicated disputes and disciplined community members according to unwritten, customary law. The community had the right to eject utterly unregenerate people from its midst.

Both household and community were patriarchal in character in the modern, feminist sense of men's power over women but, more importantly, in a much older sense. In rural Russia fathers controlled families and families "were the units of social and economic power," to borrow Linda Gordon's language.³ Men dominated family life and enjoyed sole access to formal power in the *skhod* and the *volost'* courts. Men controlled access to the most important resource of peasant life, the land, which was held communally, not individually, in most of rural Russia. As members of the *skhod*, male household heads regulated the periodic redistribution of land among the constituent households. Ordinarily, women could not claim a land allotment. Access to land devolved patrilineally, from father to sons or to collateral male relatives. Although every adult male potentially held the right to use land, only in exceptional cases might a daughter or a widow without sons lay independent claim to it.⁴ When a son was born the household might receive an additional allotment; it gained no additional resources at the birth of a daughter.

Sexual mores favored men as well. Premarital intercourse was strictly forbidden in much of rural Russia, and peasant morality operated according to a strict double standard. While chastity for both sexes was the ideal, in reality women's sexuality was the more strictly controlled. Parents instilled habits of sexual self-control far more intensively in their daughters than in their sons. Even courtship practices that acknowledged adolescent sexuality sought to contain it. In some villages courtship was modest and restrained and took place exclusively in a community setting; in others, considerable sexual freedom was permitted. In public gatherings, a young man might sit

3 Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (New York, 1988), vi.

4 See the discussion in Christine Worobec, *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period* (Princeton, N.J., 1991), 42–70.

Cambridge University Press

0521566215 - Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 - Barbara Alpern Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Patriarchy and its discontents

9

on a woman's knees, kiss her during games, and playfully grab at her breasts. In the many places where nightcourting occurred, peasant couples tested the boundary that separated sexual expression from sexual restraint. However, if it became known that a woman had transgressed the unwritten law forbidding sexual intercourse before marriage, she risked public humiliation and the loss of her chance for a decent match. Villagers kept a sharp eye out for women's deviant sexual behavior. The gates of the offending girl might be tarred, or a window in her parents' house broken. A publicly dishonored girl (and sometimes her sisters or even other unmarried maidens in her village) had enormous difficulty finding a desirable mate. Usually, only the woman bore the burden of responsibility for premarital sexual activity. Condemning an unmarried woman who had conceived a child, one peasant put it this way: "If *she* hadn't consented, nothing would have happened, and since she didn't preserve herself until marriage, there is no reason to trust her" (emphasis in the original).⁵ A girl could not always count on her seducer to marry her, even if he had promised to do so. The double standard served to make single women careful and kept rates of rural illegitimacy low – under 2 percent of live births in European Russia as a whole at the end of the nineteenth century.⁶

The issue of premarital sexual relations points to one of the ways that the power of the father not only constrained a woman's actions but also protected her and secured her social position. A woman who had lost her father had a more difficult time finding a husband. "Don't buy a horse from the priest, or marry the daughter of a widow," as one peasant saying went.⁷ Especially when there were no adult sons to lay claim to an allotment of land for the household, the death of a father often sent his family into destitution, thus severely reducing the daughter's chance of contracting a marriage and, perhaps, leaving her more vulnerable to seduction. Historians of Western European women have noted that a woman in a weak negotiating position in courtship was more likely to engage in premarital sex; this was likely to have

5 Tennishev archive, Gos. Muzei etnografii narodov SSSR (hereafter referred to as Tennishev archive), fond 7, opis 1, delo 1850, 19, Rostov district, Iaroslavl' province. All subsequent references in the Tennishev archive are to fond 7.

6 Ansley Coale, Barbara Anderson, and Erna Harm, *Human Fertility in Russia since the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1979), 252–3. Even if we allow that the rates may have been somewhat reduced by underreporting, abortion, or the marriage of pregnant brides, they nevertheless attest to the success of village controls in preventing premarital intercourse, especially when compared to rates in Russia's major cities. This point will be discussed at length in Chapter 5.

7 V.I. Dal', ed., *Posloviitsy russkogo naroda*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1984) 1: 274.

Cambridge University Press

0521566215 - Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 - Barbara Alpern Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Between the fields and the city

been the case in Russia as well.⁸ Certainly, when she did engage in pre-marital sex, such a woman had more difficulty enforcing a suitor's promise of marriage. Take the case of Marfa Gorbunova, for example. Gorbunova, who lived with her widowed mother in the village of Obrudovo in Moscow province, had allowed herself to be seduced by a youth from a neighboring village. Soon after she became pregnant, the youth abandoned her and got engaged to another woman. Evidently, she or a member of her family tried unsuccessfully to stop the marriage and force the youth to marry Marfa. Appeals to the youth, his parents, and even the village priest failed. In 1905, Marfa's uncle took the highly unusual step of petitioning the Holy Synod for assistance in stopping the seducer's marriage to the other woman and restoring his niece's honor. Like the previous efforts, this one proved fruitless.⁹ Peasant custom occasionally recognized the particular vulnerability of girls without fathers: In at least one region, if a boy seduced an orphan, the community forced him to wed her.¹⁰

Marriage, like courtship, favored men. In Russia, marriage was nearly universal and patrilocal, benefiting the groom's family by adding the labor of the bride. Peasants regarded marriage as holy and necessary for every respectable woman and man. Women who did not marry were called derogatory names and treated as pariahs, except for wisewomen, healers, and women who claimed religious vocations.¹¹ Without the access to land that marriage

8 George Alter, *Family and the Female Life Course: The Women of Verviers, Belgium, 1849–1880* (Madison, Wis., 1988), 116, 127; Rachel G. Fuchs and Leslie Page Moch, "Pregnant, Single, and Far from Home: Migrant Women in Nineteenth-Century Paris," *American Historical Review* 95, no. 4 (Oct. 1990): 1021.

9 After extracting from the uncle a stamp worth ninety kopeks, without which the Synod refused to consider his petition, it informed him that his case must be brought before a civil court. Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv gorod Moskvyy (hereafter TsGIAgM) fond 203, op. 412, delo 39, 1–3.

10 Tenishev archive, delo 1470, 16 (Novoladoga, St. Petersburg). The community's expectations of the erring male varied considerably according to region. The complex Russian situation is described in Barbara Alpern Engel, "Peasant Morality and Pre-marital Relations in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia," *Journal of Social History* 23, no. 4 (Summer 1990): 695–714.

11 Most spinsters became either beggars or religious wanderers or labored for a pittance in the households or fields of others. Galina Nosova, "Bytovoe pravoslavie," Ph.D. diss., Academy of Sciences, USSR, Moscow, 1969, 140, 146; Tatiana Bernshtam, *Molodezh' v obriadovoi zhizni Russkoi obshchiny xix-nachala xx v.* (Leningrad, 1988), 74–6; Rose Glickman, "The Peasant Woman as Healer," in *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, ed. Barbara Clements, Barbara Engel, and Christine Worobec (Berkeley, Calif., 1991), 148–62; Brenda Meehan-Waters, "To Save Oneself: Russian Peasant Women and the Development of Women's Religious Communities in Prerevolutionary Russia," in *Russian Peasant Women*, ed. Beatrice Farnsworth and Lynn Viola (New York, 1992), 122–3.