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John Bushnell

Russian Peasant Women Who Refused to Marry. Spasovite Old Believers in the 18th–19th Centuries

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017. VII, 339 S., Ktn., Tab.

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This archival study makes a very interesting and important discovery: many peasant women in the Volga region did not marry during the 18th and 19th centuries – at least until the emancipation of serfs when this study breaks off. The author thus challenges one of the basic assumptions of Russian peasant studies, that is, “the consensus among Russian historians and ethnographers [...] that Russian peasants practiced close to universal marriage” (p. 1). The author’s findings are based almost exclusively on demographic data gleaned from manorial household inventories, census returns, and confessional registers. The study focuses on villages in Vladimir, Kostroma, and Nizhnii Novgorod provinces – regions with large Old Believer populations. The central weakness of the study is the author’s insistence on a monocausal explanation: he claims that women failed to marry because they were priestless Old Believers (especially Spasovites but also adherents of the Pomorsk covenant) and driven by their religious faith. He finds that “young women who avoided marriage probably thought they had good reason to remain single, believing as they did that they lived in a God-forsaken world devoid of God’s grace and sacraments ...” (p. 181). Or as he asserts in conclusion “only conviction or ideology – that is, religious belief – can explain [women’s nuptial decisions]” (p. 289).

The author is very well aware of one key analytical limitation of his study. He knows that he cannot prove conclusively that the villages he studied were made up principally of Old Believers not to speak of Spasovites. The problem he confronts is central to the study of Old Belief: most Old Believers carefully hid their identities by assuming fictitious Orthodox lifestyles, bribing priests and officials, or hiding in the forest. Much of Bushnell’s evidence is therefore based on inferences drawn from tidbits of information that are not necessarily convincing. For example, on the Baki estate in Kostroma province (owned by the Dolgorukii and then the Lieven family) – the subject of chapter 6 – some Old Believer families registered as “schismatics” for the 1782 census, shortly after Catherine II. had abolished the double tax on Old Believers. Undoubtedly, only a small minority registered but the fourteen extended families that did so were evenly split between priestly and priestless Old Believers (p. 203). Neither is there any evidence that the priestless Old Believers constituted a majority in Baki villages nor is there any clue that they were Spasovites. Faced with this seemingly insurmountable difficulty Bushnell dug deeper into archives and found government and church reports from the years 1852 and 1883 that show that at least a third of the ca. 100 000 known Old Believers in Kostroma province were Spasovites. While Bushnell must be commended for the depth of his archival knowledge his deduction that “there was a sizable number of Spasovites at Baki in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (p. 218) remains impressionistic.

The author greatly overemphasizes statistics at the expense of qualitative information. This has led him to make a number of speculations about the reasons for marriage aversion. While I agree that it is very difficult to reconstruct the thinking of the women who failed to marry there are plenty

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of testimonies about Old Believer marriage practices in consistorial records, government reports (e. g., compiled by the eminent Old Belief specialist Pavel Mel'nikov), and church investigations housed in the local archives that Bushnell consulted. For example, Bushnell insists that peasant women made their own independent choices about whether or not to marry. But official reports show, for example, that Old Believer elopement practices were highly ritualized affairs that clearly involved the bride's parents who were only pretending ignorance. They also show that well-to-do fathers took the initiative and bribed estate owners to let their daughters avoid marriage and live in monastic cells in the forests. One must agree with the author's assumption that many women were forced into marriage against their will by parents, estate owners, churchmen, and state agents. How did they respond to this coercion? Did they fall into anguish and despair? Or did they resist and flee into the forests to join one of the many women's hermitages (*pustyni*) that proliferated in remote regions since the 17th century? It would have been helpful to learn more about the emotions and convictions of peasant women, both those who successfully refused to marry or those forced into marriage against their will. Is it really impossible to capture at least some of their voices?

It is very difficult to establish a clear correlation between marriage aversion and religious belief. The author concedes as much in chapter 3 where he focuses on marriage behavior in Kuplia parish (Gorokhovets district, Vladimir province): "We cannot say for sure whether any of these unmarried women were Old Believers but some probably were" (p. 113). In fact, Bushnell's own data show that many Orthodox and priestly Old Believer women also failed to marry while unknown numbers of Spasovite women did in fact marry (pp. 175–176, 216, 219). It is certainly noteworthy that starting in the late 18th century Spasovite doctrine changed and began to emphasize the importance of marriage. Not surprisingly by the 1830s one finds Spasovite villages in which marriage was universal (p. 231).

It would be important to consider alternative explanations for peasant marriage aversion. Bushnell's study touches upon many non-religious factors that likely influenced peasant behavior, e. g., high bride prices, high fees charged by priests, the impossibility of finding suitable brides locally, a female population surplus due to conscription, women shunned for "immoral behavior" (e. g., the birth of illegitimate children), illness, feeble-mindedness, or blindness. On the Baki estate, for example, a significant number of unmarried women suffered from physical disabilities including axe wounds (due to the dangers of work in the forests). But perhaps the most important factor impinging upon peasant marriage decisions was the level of landlord activism. The Obolenskii, for example, managed to eliminate marriage resistance almost completely on their estates in Nizhnii Novgorod province by 1861. By contrast, Elena Dolgorukova who owned Baki in the late 18th century allowed parents full autonomy in making marriage decisions about their daughters. When she handed over the estate to Christoph Lieven in 1800 a large percentage of women – both Orthodox and Old Believers – were unmarried. The new owner's aggressive pro-marriage policies greatly reduced the number of single women within a period of twelve years.

The critique advanced in this review should not deflect from the core value of this study: the data on marriage aversion that Bushnell has collected in this study are extremely valuable. They need to be seriously considered and analyzed by other scholars. It is indeed perplexing that scholarship has not noticed that a substantial percentage of peasant women did not marry (averages established by Bushnell range between 20 to 60 %). And Bushnell's concluding observation that this

phenomenon was not limited to Old Believer settlements in the Volga region makes further study of peasant marriage avoidance all the more important.

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David Feest

**Ordnung schaffen. Bäuerliche Selbstverwaltungen und Obrigkeit
im ausgehenden Zarenreich (1834–1889)**

Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018. VIII, 358 S., 2 Abb. = Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte, 83. ISBN: 978-3-447-10722-8.

Jahrzehntlang kreiste die Diskussion über die russische Bauernbefreiung von 1861 um die Frage, welche Perspektiven diese den Bauern eröffnet oder verbaut habe. Weil die Reform die althergebrachte Agrarverfassung bewusst beibehielt und die Bauern sich selbst überließ, habe sie diese in Armut gehalten und schließlich in die Rebellion getrieben. Diese Auffassung ist zwar nicht unwidersprochen geblieben, aber auch nicht widerlegt. Recht und Ökonomie hätten die Kluft zwischen Land und Stadt vertieft, statt sie zu schließen. David Feest nimmt in seiner nun vorliegenden Habilitationsschrift einen anderen Weg und kommt am Ende doch zu einem ähnlichen Ergebnis. „Ordnung schaffen“ lautet der Titel seiner Studie. Diesem Anspruch, Ordnung zu schaffen, genauer: den zugrundeliegenden Ordnungsvorstellungen, gilt sein wissenschaftliches Interesse. Reformbürokraten und Gutsadelige mochten unterschiedliche Interessen verfolgen. Gemeinsam war ihnen der Anspruch, das ländliche Russland vernünftig zu strukturieren. Wo sie an slavophile Denkmuster anknüpften, entwarfen sie das russische Dorf als sittliche Einheit, setzten Dorfgemeinde und Umteilung in eins und blieben blind für innere Differenzierungen des russischen Dorfes. Die Reformen, die aus diesen Ordnungsentwürfen hervorgingen, prallten folglich auf ein durchaus pragmatisches Beharrungsvermögen von Bauern, die sich ihren eigenen Reim auf die neuen Institutionen machten. Es geht also um konkurrierende Wahrnehmungen und Wissensformen. Deren Standardisierung, so die These des Buches, verlief ausgesprochen konfliktreich.

Solche Befunde lassen sich nur am konkreten Fallbeispiel schlüssig herausarbeiten. Das Gouvernement Rjazan' ist überzeugend gewählt. In seiner sozioökonomischen Vielfalt bot es einen Spiegel des europäischen Russlands. Mit A. I. Košelev und S. V. Volkonskij kamen zwei maßgebliche Akteure der Bauernbefreiung aus dem Gouvernement Rjazan', beide verwalteten dort ihre Güter und hatten schon vor 1861 versucht, ihre leibeigenen Bauern zu rationalerem Wirtschaften anzuhalten. In eigens verfassten Denkschriften stilisierten sie die Erziehung der Bauern zur gesellschaftlichen Aufgabe des Gutsadels, der mit der Reform seine ständische Legitimation einbüßte. Beide wirkten schließlich nach 1861 wesentlich daran mit, die große Reform in ihrer Heimatregion auch umzusetzen. Davon, dass die Bauern sich solchen Zumutungen überwiegend verweigerten, ließen sie sich nicht beirren. Am Beispiel Rjazan's lässt sich die Grundkonstellation der russischen

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