

Laura Olson
Associate Professor
University of Colorado – Boulder, Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and
Literatures
IARO 2004-2005
Russia

Carrying On: Russian Rural Women, Tradition and Transgression

Topic of Research:

My research in Russia considers ways in which retirement-age rural women have been both celebrated and stigmatized as the carriers of national tradition and Russian identity. In Russian folklore scholarship and in popular media since the late nineteenth century, one can trace two prevailing and seemingly contradictory views of rural women's culture: (1) that female villagers have done the Russian people a great service by preserving national folk "treasures," and (2) that women have not been worthy guardians of this precious cultural wealth. My project examines the roots and development of these notions and their impact on middle-aged and elderly women whose views of self and nation may have been shaped by the responsibility of embodying national tradition. As part of my project, I am investigating the folk song repertoire choices of retirement-age female villagers -- not simply as folklore texts, but as means of constituting identities (including gendered ones), representing an archive of memory, establishing relationships within the community, and providing a forum for self-expression.

Relevance and Contribution to Field:

My work offers a counterpoint to much Russian scholarship on Russian folklore, in that it addresses contemporary folklore as a means of expressing and constituting identity. I focus upon rural women of retirement age partly because little has been written (in Russia or the West) on them; yet they are known -- anecdotally if not scientifically -- to be more influential than their economic weight, numbers or visibility would seem to dictate. My application of theories of gender and power to the study of Russian folklore and popular culture is significant, since much of the Western scholarship on gender in Russian culture has focused upon high culture (literature and artistic film). The study of rural women's culture has been carried out almost exclusively by Russian folklorists, musicologists, and ethnographers; until very recently, in most of these studies gender has appeared as an afterthought.

Approach and Research Methodology:

My research was divided into two parts: archival research and ethnographic methodology.

Use of Archives: In St. Petersburg, I perused and took extensive notes on eighteen collections of folklore made from 1890 to 1950 in the Academy of Sciences Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkinskii Dom). In the Petersburg filial of the Archive of the Academy of Sciences, I spent time reading notes of a folklorist from the 1920s who took

an interest in the influence of gender and age on the folk teller. I also read and photocopied published books and journal articles in the St. Petersburg Russian National Library and the library of the Ethnographic Museum. In Moscow, I perused the notes and letters of a musicologist from the 1890s in the archive of the Glinka Museum of Musical Culture.

The goal of this archival and library work was to discover in what ways folklore was viewed as gendered by scholars or their informants. Since very little was published on gender until the 1990s, I chose to seek such information in the unpublished field diaries and summary reports of folklorists. For example, had scholars written statements of what they were looking for in the field (or what they did not find), observations of contexts in which singing took place, biographical notes about informants, or notes on informants' commentaries about the songs they sang? I found that very few of the collections of folklorists during the period of 1890-1940s contained such information, which suggests either that they did not write such information (which is likely given the drive to collect large quantities of texts rather than information about the texts or informants), or they or their archivists did not consider such information worth keeping. However, I did find some scholars and others who kept notes on such issues. These tended to be scholars with a journalistic or literary education or inclination, or non-scholars (amateur collectors). I read the notes of such collectors in detail, although even here mention of gender was scarce.

In the archive of the Folk Music Laboratory of the Moscow Conservatory I took notes on the dissertation and field notes from the 1970s through 1990s of a musicologist who worked in Riazan oblast, in a region in which I did fieldwork in 1995, 1996, 1998, and on this trip (2004). The goal here was to familiarize myself with work done in this geographical area and to identify the repertoire of the folk singing groups in previous years.

Fieldwork: I made a two-week trip (late October) by rented car to Siamzha region, Vologda oblast in the Russian North and a one-week trip (early December) by bus to Kasimov region, Riazan oblast in Central Russia. During the trip to Vologda oblast I was accompanied by two students of the folklore faculty of St. Petersburg State University, one of whom was born in the village of Siamzha and whose uncle and grandfather still lived there. The goal in taking her along was for me to more quickly gain the confidence of locals due to my relationship with her (this student returned to Petersburg after two days due to work commitments). The other student provided technical assistance with tape recording and videotaping, and helped me to understand the local dialect. We stayed in the home of the student's uncle and made numerous day-trips to outlying villages. For me, this was a first exposure to Vologda oblast village culture, and I was able to identify rich areas for further research. We studied in detail five folk singing ensembles (with varying degrees of activity) in five village areas in the region. We interviewed 51 informants, including local officials, about local traditions and their attitudes towards their traditions. In the local museum I was able to photocopy parts of a study done in the 1980s on the wedding songs of this region, and handwritten song texts donated to the museum by one of our informants. In spring, 2005 I plan to

return to one or two villages in this region to do more in-depth fieldwork. I also hope to access the field reports and recordings of the Leningrad State Conservatory made in this region in 1980 and 1992, which are housed in the St. Petersburg Folkloric-Ethnographic Center.

On the trip to Riazan oblast I traveled by myself to the relatively remote and sparsely inhabited village of Kochemary and stayed for the week in the home of a 79-year old woman whom I had interviewed on two previous occasions, in 1995 and 1998. The information provided by this informant had interested me greatly on previous trips, and this longer stay in her home, without others to accompany me, proved to be an excellent source for more in-depth information about her worldview and village culture. This informant was currently mourning the death of her 48-year old daughter six months prior, therefore she would not sing secular songs. However, I gathered a group of four other retirement-age women and one man to sing secular songs, and also spent four sessions on religious songs with two of these women, my hostess, and two other women whom I interviewed singly (including one in a nearby village). I attended services in the church in the nearby village of Kitovo, and interviewed the new and old priests about their views of local participation in religious services and belief in witchcraft. In spring, 2005 I plan to visit this village again to attend the one-year anniversary memorial for my hostess's daughter, Orthodox Easter services, and local celebration of *Kraskaia gorka*, another religious holiday related to Easter.

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions:

The fact that archived folklore collections contained very little information on gender is significant. I believe it stems largely from the emphasis on text rather than performer, which persisted well into the twentieth century. It also suggests that gender seemed to folklorists so obvious a division as to be not worthy of comment. This interpretation was reinforced by my conversations with Russian folklorists for whom the question of gender was unimportant and cut-and-dried: for them, certain genres were predominantly "women's" and others were "men's," and the only complicating factor was that the exact division of genres varied according to geographical area. My examination of the archived collections also suggested another surprising conclusion: among lyric songs, there often seemed to be no predictable correlation between the gender of the informant(s) and the gender of the text's speaker. For example, in a collection from 1921 a man sang a typical "women's lyric" complaining about a woman's lot, while a woman sang a prison song, typically a male genre (*Ozarovskaia*). Without notes about the contexts in which such songs might be sung, or how the singers related to their songs, there is no way of knowing whether such "cross-singing" was viewed as anomalous, parodic, or completely unremarkable. Unfortunately, due to the dearth of such information in collections, it appears it can only be gleaned by doing new fieldwork.

In general, however, information about the gendered character of Russian folklore can now be obtained in contemporary collections, books and articles. By talking with Russian scholars and visiting specialized libraries and bookshops, I was able to compile and acquire a fairly large bibliography of works on folk culture that deal, directly or indirectly, with gender. The availability of this body of information and the dearth of

archival information changes somewhat how I envision the historical part of my book. My study of how Russian folklorists have viewed gender will rest largely upon both contemporary and older published sources, complemented by the little I was able to glean from unpublished sources.

The other component of my book will rest upon my fieldwork, and will treat the particular phenomena I was able to observe in villages. In the communities I visited I identified three areas of particular interest: women's roles in the spiritual life of the community; women's roles as witches or the converse, healers and protectors; women's bawdy traditions. What roles do women play in leading and singing Christian sacred songs and prayers? How is magic healing carried out? In Kochemary (Riazan' oblast) and in Dvenitsa (Vologda oblast), the role played by retired women in both these realms is significant, and in my book I will be able to document this and explain how women's active roles differ from "official" functions designated by the Church and the health care system. In Pigilinka and Rezha (Vologda oblast), I became acquainted with local bawdy traditions and will be able to describe what appeal this transgressive aspect of the culture holds for older women. I envision that another chapter of my book will treat and compare contemporary men's and women's folk music-making, examining examples of same-sex and mixed-sex music-making in Russian villages (using as examples Siamzha, Vologda oblast; and Kochemary, Riazan' oblast, and others).

The decision to treat men's and women's music-making in my book (which I originally envisioned to be about rural women's culture) arose due to methodological concerns. During fieldwork I gained information about the role of gender in rural culture by asking whether people viewed songs, dances, and traditions as belonging to a specific gender and why, and about the importance of same-gender groups in their daily life. Usually people were willing to talk about gendered categories (e.g. "women's songs," "male friends"), which suggested to me that those categories were at the very least meaningful to them. But I discovered that even richer information about gender was often displayed before my eyes as I spent time with mixed-gender groups. How people positioned themselves in a room, how they addressed each other, how they interacted and the songs they chose to sing or lead (or not sing) were often significantly gendered, especially when people of both genders were present. This information was more valuable than that produced by interviews, since it was not prompted by me and therefore was less tainted by my influence, and involved a complex behavioral context. The mixed-gender context seemed to be key. Perhaps the best way to identify women's folklore or women's culture is to see it in interrelationship with men's folklore/ men's culture. In future fieldwork during spring, 2005 I hope to be able to generate or discover more situations in which I can observe men and women interacting (in particular musically).

Future Research Agendas:

In general, Russian rural culture has been inadequately studied. The amount of work that needs to be done is enormous. Post-1991, some scholarly attention in the West has turned to the regions because of their increased political and economic importance, and the possibility of researching in areas other than Moscow and St. Petersburg. This

work is much needed and appreciated as we begin to understand the importance of provincial and rural culture, economics and politics. In particular, studies of Russian rural culture by Western scholars are rare, due to the difficulties of conducting fieldwork in Russia. However, these difficulties are now quite surmountable given adequate funding (for transportation and assistance). In future I would like to see more studies of contemporary village culture, such as studies of the visual art of the village, studies of rural consumption of popular culture, etc.