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Book review: Margaret Paxon, *Solovyovo: the story of memory in a Russian village*

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Margaret Paxon's book is an exploration of memory and its significance in social persistence, erasure, or change in rural Russia. The author of this review is not an anthropologist, and is not in a position to evaluate the merits of the book from the point of view of that discipline. The richness of its insights that go well beyond anthropology, and are extremely valuable for political scientists, however, makes this book all the more remarkable.

The book is based on ethnographic research that Paxon largely carried out between 1994 and 1995 while living in, and observing Solovyovo, a tiny village tucked in Belgorod oblast in Northwest Russia. A young anthropology student, she was quickly adopted as a *svoya*, a surrogate *dochka* by the middle-aged local couple that hosted her, opening doors and hearts and serving as the key source of insights. All in all, Paxon spent some 15 months in Solovyovo, participating in the daily activities of the locals and sharing in their happiness and hardships. Painstaking material was gathered on key aspects of local life, from social and economic organization, to local history, religious practices, to sorcery, festivals and the village calendar, to folk material. Most of the village residents were interviewed, as well as those from surrounding villages.

In the Introduction, Paxon highlights the many functions of social memory, which could be key building blocks of resistance, or conduits for change. Drawing on classical anthropological literature on memory, the book masterfully unravels the instrumentality of memory against external impositions upon the local space – be they Soviet, religious, or other. It also shows how these impositions could be also successfully internalized and filtered through the local cosmologies, beliefs, and practices.

As a political scientist, I found particularly interesting the insights on relationships between institutions, power and cultural meanings, between individual and group level agency and power. The introduction of the “chuzhoi” central Party administrative power layer, while co-opting villagers in the process, is etched in the memory of many in Solovyovo as an external imposition upon the local “svoi” (one's own) formation – the most important concept in local social organization -- with its own social organization of the household *khoziain* and the *obshina statrosta* (76). The vindication of their mistrust that came with losing ones family or loved ones to Stalin's camps and other manifestations of totalitarian horror serves to further reproduce the association of the *chuzhie* with “unpredictable, sometimes miraculous dangers.” The very unpredictability and “miraculousness” of these *chuzhie* formations—be they from the world of the miraculous, the otherworldly forces, the forest *leshii* (demons), the *domovoy*, the urban dwellers, or indeed the Party functionaries-- is itself however an explanation of the paradox of the submission to external power, at one time chastised, at others conjuring memories of “radiant past,” or fear that is awe-inspiring, order-bringing, of Stalin that becomes a *khoziain*, part ofn the *svoi*-formation. Yet, the argument extends far beyond an explanation of the proverbial fatalism and power and terror submission proclivities of the Russian psyche. Rather than being a “discursive opiate that gives rise to social passivity,” memory, after all, is also about resistance.

Paxon masterfully juggles with metaphors to illustrate these paradoxes of memory's topography at work. Thus, local pagan rituals stubbornly persist despite external "battle over memory" and politics of the calendar—be they Christian, Soviet, or now post-communist. And efforts to harness local society through the clubhouse, with its artificiality and boredom, are resisted through, among other things, the medium of the *chastushki*, the authority-defying obscene folklore medium. At other times, though, the memory of the "radiant past" of order, happiness, shared poverty, group sacrifice, "comradeliness of work," of Soviet propaganda-induced belief in a "radiant future" builds up resistance to chaos of the "wretched present," to post-communist evils of greed, of inequality, of social disconnectedness, and lack of goals. The very order and coercion of the external imposition of the communist regime becomes one that keeps the local social fabric together through discipline, now exposed to evils of chaos. The concept of "frameless freedom," so reviled in the west, becomes associated with its perceived evils, or TV violence and cheap sexual shows.¹¹³

Crucially, memory also shapes agency in profound ways. Its manifestations are many—from people taking matters in their own hands through traditional healing practices¹⁸¹, be it when *zglaz* or *porcha* occurs and envy threatens the social horizontality, or in the case of actual physical ailments, with "lifting off" the "weighty substance that causes illness. Agency is also manifested through the expected behavior of the otherworldly powers that are meant to punish transgressors, as was the case with those wretched souls who destroyed churches, crossed the icon, or transgressed upon the most sacred of them all, the red corner. And when the young defy the *babki* when celebrating the age-old spring *gulyanki* rituals, to break their rules and "thumb their nose at authority."

The beauty and resilience of memory does not obscure the evils of parochial localism and when resistance fails, to cope with change. Paxon is not oblivious to what she saw or what she heard in narratives, and what are broader pathologies of present-day Russia—the alcoholism, the violence against women, the venomous xenophobia, as indeed a withdrawal into the backdoor when key national events occur. The stunning beauty of the scenes of rural landscape—be they physical or cognitive, contrasted with their ugly sides, add to a profoundly honest and perceptive portrait of rural Russia.

It is also a portrait painted with an admirable mastery of the Russian language and its native, local idiom. As a native Russian, trained originally as a linguist, I marveled at her perception of the grammatical nuances that convey subtle meanings and emotions, the precision of her translation of Russian words and metaphors.

As someone working on local government in Russia, I would have liked to see more concrete examples of relationships between Solovyoro's residents and local power authorities. While the book has extremely rich detail on other essential institutions, such as the Orthodox Church or the local Culture Clubhouse, political institutions are presented in a more abstract way, which is surprising considering that local government is the level of authority that is meant to be most close to the local citizenry. While some examples of attitudes to the communist-era regional Party and soviet authorities are given in the book, it would have been nice to see similar examples from post-communist local

power structures, as a further illustration of how memory shapes patterns of authority and attitudes to it, particularly if this authority is at a very local level.

This minor criticism should in no way detract from the overall excellent quality of the book. *Solovyovo* would be of great interest to scholars from a wide range of disciplines, and working on Russia, other post-communist states and beyond.

Language and metaphor being so central to the reproduction of memory, Paxon's book is also a feat in exploring the nuances of the Russian language and its local, rural idiom.

(church burners 249 0, as happens when one crosses the icon, and when communists threaten the "most svoi" of khoziain, the red corner icon, . red corner is filled not just with icons but with ancestors whon watch over, who can be mischievous, etc., and must be respected, can misbehave, must be appeased. 256

soviet system tried to harness local beliefs for power (krasnyy ugol), the directionality of their obrasheniya to their own soviet leaders.

rodina, own land , ancestors, draw people together, social cohesion.

.” 181

dobrom dobro. the dead are there to remind if something is done wrong or not to their liking in social relations. 197
she likens social memory to a forged landscape.

outside governmental powers are essentially regarded as chujhie. 326, and even happenings like putsch p[erceived as distant from local concerns., but through wwii nation became an intimate category inspiring broader locality transcending patriotism.

agency is also felt in limited success of the politics of the calendar even now (as k what is independence day?) 285.
calendars embody narratives of group identity, the powers that be ultimately do not succeed in their battle over memory through calendar, as calendarical milestones are scenes of confrontation between ideologies. also, orthodoix church did not fully succeed, as local agrarian calendar traditions tied to a piece of land, and not a centralized external force, remained 278

ultimately, functionality of camedar, loiek yegoryi den to let out cows. 289

she comes up with concept of “symbolism of otherworldly powers.” 163 and discusses the harnessing or turning toard these powers.

gulyanki is a way of thumbing one’s nose at authority, breaking rules that babki make., 301

chastushka and politial obscenities.

violence against women, alcoholism, etc, expressions of venomous xenophobia—she is not shy of describing these.

clubhouse 335., as way of reigning people in by regional authorities.

chastushki is manifestation of resistance, of sentiment directed at powers at large: leave us alone. 306. resistance to being tamed by the clubhouse, gulyanki, gulyanki is also central to svoi-formation.

verticality, envy and structure of social unevenness

Local egncy: take thins in their own hands, healers etc. 153 healing practices observed to explore directions and limits of human agency in the village.
concept of obrasheniye, what one does when one is beyond hope, 159

beautiful images, language. yet, no dillusion: alcoholism, poverty, egtc

role of space, of trespassing space 147

memory is a source of resistance to outside forces, including the force of the state and call for “nation”, she concludes. go to graveyard on troitsa and not to church.

social memory is stronger and more resilient than it appears and even forces of market etc won't erase. 346

social control, discipline 101

raz verbal prefixes 103

p. 96 svoi svoboda`as collective. radiant future located in the past and not in future.

One omission in the book in my view is that

criticism: one slight criticism I would make is

language, metaphor and narratives are powerful carriers of social memory. 90 stress language use.

khozian, head of a household with moral authority p 74

Social memory serves many functions: both resistance and change. Book masterful in showing how memory served to resist external impositions on the local—be they soviet, orthodox, etc; and also internalize and filter external authority and impositions through own local cosmology and practices.

draws on classical work on memory that suggests its usage could be instrumental., cultural and inertial, looks at all, and its persistence and change aspects.

to me most interesting part was examination of relationships between institutions, power and cultural meanings,

memory as landscape, cognitive mapping.

7 features of memory's landscape: landmarks, pathways,, circles (notion of inclusive we); vector fields.

memory is inscribed in action.

chapter 1 theory.

chapter 2 village in space and time—history of peasantry etc. peasantry sought to consistently preserve local community and identity against external pressures.

kolkhoz fall, generation change. older people. but how do we know memory will not die with them? and they will not turn into memory less monsters that Shukshin describes?

method described: page 47

chapter 3: being one's own in Solov'yovo.: identity svoi-cchuzhoi boundary maintenance., dvor, bride from another village, etc, rod, rodnoi., obshina. kolhoz and obshina became interchangeable.

economic organization: dislike of money, with shujhie. otherwise, exchanged p. 72

hierarchy: the hozyain. p. 74

then cites well-trodden literature on tsar as hozyain etc.

resentment of party and LSG officials. 76 as chujhie.

discussion of svoi chujhoi is important so it relates to power and attitudes to authority.

describes misery of local life: transport problems, alcoholism, hand washing clothes in the river, etc. sober.

to me as a Russian, stunning mastery of the language, idioms and metaphors. almost inevitably, one finds errors, but I could not identify a single one. where dialects used, she clearly specifies.

memory: collectivization, Stalin,
problem: no mention of LSG. while authority discussed extensively and some forms there like church, and the clubhouse, power structures remain abstract. this is a pity, but does not detract from the book, would have made it even more interesting to Polish people.

fascinating and moving study. despite complexity of doing local research, delicate task etc (I myself have experience). the author of this review has also experience with very local fieldwork. thorough book.