

Rouhier-Willoughby, Jeanmarie. *Village Values: Negotiating Identity, Gender, and Resistance in Contemporary Russian Life-Cycle Rituals*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2008. 320 pp. \$29.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0893573539.

Village Values: Negotiating Identity, Gender, and Resistance in Contemporary Russian Life-Cycle Rituals is Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby's project to conceptualize modern Russian urban life-cycle rites and explore how participants negotiated various identities as members of families and communities and as citizens of the Soviet Union and post-Communist Russia.

Provoked by a young male doctor's remark that obstetrics were "women's work," the author "began to wonder if there might not be a connection between the role of woman as healer and midwife in the nineteenth-century village to the contemporary urban attitude that 'women were better suited to gynecology and obstetrics'." Was this attitude, Rouhier-Willoughby pondered, "inherited from the nineteenth-century village?" (1). Exploring the possibility of this connection required rejecting inherited notions about folklore being the exclusive domain of rural communities, commonly seen in the equation of folklore with "traditional culture." Instead, Rouhier-Willoughby opted for a definition of folklore that includes both "traditional culture" as well as the informal, unofficial practices and notions of urban communities and subgroups defined by various limiting factors like age, religion, region, occupation, class, and so on. In her statement of theoretical position, Rouhier-Willoughby rejects approaches to ritual as exclusively a maintainer of social relationships, structure and control, opting instead for a model whereby life-cycle rituals allow participants the opportunity to learn about, adjust psychologically to, and, indeed, to create new social roles afforded by the rites and to experience public acknowledgement of their new statuses (23). Thus afforded a kind of continuum of popular beliefs and practices (never stable and always subject to renegotiation and adaptation) stretching from 19th century village traditions, through the Soviet experience, and up to and including contemporary post-Soviet life, the author traces continuities, ruptures, revivals, and restorations in birthing, wedding, and mourning rites.

Chapter one presents the concept, fundamental to the author's argument, of the Soviet ritual complex as a dynamic synthesis of "nineteenth century folk behaviors," "Soviet practices," and "ideas and behaviors from Western Europe and America" (3). By exploring and

tracing the changes, conflicts, and accommodations achieved between these forces, Rouhier-Willoughby aims to chart the social experience of Soviet and Russian citizens as expressed in life-cycle rituals from the 50s to today. In chapter two the author surveys “Nineteenth Century Life-Cycle Rituals.” Chapter three presents childbirth practices in Soviet Russia 1950-1990. In chapter four, Rouhier-Willoughby considers Soviet weddings. Chapter five is about the Soviet Russian funeral. In chapter six, “Life Cycle Rituals during Late Perestroika and in the Post-Soviet World,” Rouhier-Willoughby’s focus becomes the conflict between Russian and Soviet traditions and “recently introduced Western democratic and capitalist models” (231). The book concludes with a final chapter, a summary of “The Soviet Ritual Complex.”

Rouhier-Willoughby’s theoretical position is that Soviet era life-cycle rituals “exhibit both acceptance of certain Soviet-era values, and a stubborn retention of material that contradicted state ideology, material that was necessary for the negotiation of identity independent of the state’s values” (226). This formulation has both advantages and disadvantages. Its strength is that it affords the author a consistent and coherent theoretical approach to organizing and generalizing about her data: eighty-six interviews and a variety of secondary literature about Soviet and post-Soviet social realities. The tension between private and public, the individual and the state forms a productive methodological leitmotif and is developed with a great deal of sensitivity and finesse. Nonetheless, this approach is based on binaries, and here and there in the development of her argument, certain stark, and, in my view, overstated, oppositions appear. Rouhier-Willoughby sometimes conceives and presents actions and justifications on both sides—both private citizens and the state apparatus—so as to maximize the polemical effect. The author sometimes presents ritual practice and motivation too much in terms of the collision between the State’s official program for how its citizens should live and think and the way that ordinary people used ritual to push back against the State. Individuals, in this narrative, accept parts of the State’s program for life-cycle practices when they already are in agreement with those specific components. Other ideas and practices, such as cremation, are resisted. This approach recognizes the agency exercised by individuals vis-à-vis a controlling State bureaucracy. Yet I find that the author too often presents both sides at the top of their game. There is little recognition of compromise. The State is always either succeeding or failing. Individuals either accept the state’s meddling or resent and undermine it wherever they cannot openly change or

challenge it. Rouhier-Willoughby is keen to see conflict—"a direct rebuttal" (226), "a form of resistance" (227). This stance is effective polemically but may miss opportunities to trace synthesis and accommodation on both sides, especially the kind of accommodation that arises from acquiescence.

An example is the Soviet practice of controlling the allotment of cemetery plots so as to make it difficult or impossible for family members to be buried next to one another. The purpose here, according to Rouhier-Willoughby, was to disrupt traditional mourning practices of survivors to visit the graves of relatives, especially on special days. This move is presented as the action of the State to reconfigure mourning practices along more ideologically favorable lines and the reactions of private citizens as resentful. This is certainly part of the story. Ideology may well have been the original impetus behind the State's action. However, since it was possible to overcome these difficulties through *blat* (connections) and, most certainly, bribes, the question arises: was the continuation of this policy of making difficult the adjacent burial of members of the same family entirely a product of ideology? Perhaps the advantages it afforded to cogs in the machine, i.e., mid-level bureaucrats, quickly became as or more important than a tool for top-down social engineering.

Also, what were the results of this policy upon reaching the inevitable *modus vivendi*? How did Soviet citizens adapt themselves and their mourning rites to these new circumstances? What did they do beyond resenting the government? Not exploring this aspect is, I think, at least partially due to the author's tendency to treat life-cycle rituals as one-time events. Of course they are singular occurrences, to a large extent, unlike calendar rituals, which repeat every year. Nonetheless, these rituals, not just as general practices but also as discrete events, continue to develop over time. Birthdays, wedding and funeral anniversaries are observed. Attitudes and indeed memories about what happened and what rituals meant change and transform. I did not detect that the author made significant allowance for the chronological gap between her interviews (recorded over the last ten years) and the objects of her interviewees' recollections: Soviet era life-cycle rites. From the perspective of post-Perestroika Russia, subjects' current remembrances of events twenty, thirty and more years ago, and what those experiences meant, have been inevitably shaped by both the passage of time and the new intellectual and spiritual landscape of today's Russia. Religion and spirituality clearly are much more in the public's consciousness now than

they were thirty years ago. Can the recollection and retelling of how these rites were executed and what they meant to their actors at the time be accurately recovered? What about the author's status as an outsider, as a Russian-speaking American ethnographer and social scientist? Was she prone to solicit certain kinds of answers from her respondents at the expense of others? These, of course, are perennial issues all across the human sciences. I raise the question not to diminish the author's achievement, but rather to complicate her conclusions and raise issues for further research.

There are other places where Rouhier-Willoughby's methodological approach is problematic, such as her basic categories of classification for components of ritual beliefs and practices. "Folk" proves fairly easy to define and maintain, but the Soviet versus "Western" dichotomy is trickier. Rouhier-Willoughby attempts to address the problem of a reductive, simplified "West" in the Russian imagination (Yurchak's "Imaginary West: *tam, u nikh*") by defining it as "rituals adopted or rejected from this mythical "West", "as viewed through the lens of the Soviet Russians themselves during the period under consideration" (6). While this move allows the author to maintain neat, distinct categories to manipulate for her thesis, it is not unproblematic: the danger exists of allowing the scholar's subjects to define terms and categories for her, especially given respondents' chronological distance from their ritual experiences of yesteryear. Since "Western" scientific and social ideas and practices largely passed through various filtering layers of government and culture in Russia, especially during Soviet times, it becomes difficult to separate what was Soviet from what was "Western." The classification depends on the situated, biased perspective of the respondent and, it must be admitted, the scholar. Generally, in the author's presentation, any idea or approach also practiced or having originated in the West, such as the application of modern medical techniques to the childbirth process, gets classified as "Western." Policies and ideologies that support the notion of the State exerting violence, coercion, and other means of control over the populace are classified and reacted to as "Soviet." Rouhier-Willoughby acknowledges complications to this dichotomy primarily in her discussion of post-Soviet practices, where nostalgia for the stability and (relative) equality of Soviet life has caused many respondents to reflect more favorably, or at least with less one-sidedness, on their Soviet experiences and what they meant.

The overview of nineteenth-century Russian life-cycle rituals presented in chapter two is characterized by a reliance on the ethnographic and social data regarding these one-hundred-plus-year-old rites as presented during the last several decades (the oldest entry in her bibliography is Sokolov's *Russian Folklore* from 1950). Rather than explore descriptions of nineteenth-century village rituals coeval with the practices themselves from nineteenth century ethnographic publications and archival holdings—however ideologically and theoretically biased they might be—the author has preferred to cite her data as digested and interpreted by recent scholars. On the one hand, it is not essential to go back to primary sources since this material has largely been presented in modern academic editions and is much easier to find and work with than the original publications and documents. On the other hand, this approach carries the risk of inheriting current biases and ideological stances. The author selects material to present as a description of the folk background exploited, adapted, and challenged by contemporary urban life-cycle practices based on data already culled and filtered.

Perhaps I overstate the pitfalls inherent in this approach. The author, indeed, is generally careful to avoid much interpretation of any sort in this chapter, avoiding structuralist and other interpretative methodologies and instead offering a concise, generalized account of the key features of the “traditional” versions of the three rites. Very rarely does she include details like Baiburin's ideas “that life-cycle rituals were associated with *dolia*” (48), and that “the [newly-married] couple was still generally in transition until the birth of their first child” (49).

The second chapter ends with a discussion of the “Early Soviet Period.” Rouhier-Willoughby, who states elsewhere that her focus is on life-cycle rites from 1950 to the present day, needs to say something about the period up to the death of Stalin, but her real concentration is both before (in the form of traditional village rites) and after the pre-1950 Soviet period. This chronological restriction obviously made the author's job easier. There are live informants to interview for this period, there was much more stability following World War II as opposed to during and preceding it, which allowed for a more institutionalized and regular set of practices to systemize and generalize about, and, finally, the post-Stalin-era saw the emergence of “ritual specialists,” academically trained and ideologically motivated Soviet social engineers who theorized and wrote about how to shape the ritual life of the Soviet people to better conform to and reflect the State's values and goals. It is therefore understandable why the author would choose to concentrate on the post-

1950 period. It does however leave a gap between the village and the urban setting of the middle and late Soviet eras. What happened to life-cycle rituals and the social dynamics that such practices both shaped and were shaped by in the 20s, 30s and 40s? Certainly there were many false starts and contradictory phenomena. The author implies that traditional practices were taken, preserved, or reconstituted from the villages by city dwellers. What happened in the countryside during the early Soviet period and how did that shape what happened later in the cities? There was more going on than the wholesale destruction and repudiation of traditional practices by Soviet authorities. If nothing else, then an instructive dress-rehearsal for what would come later took place in the 20s, 30s and 40s. I mention this less as criticism of the author's work here than as an area for further research, something for future scholars to consider.

Rouhier-Willoughby's most effective and interesting chapter is her treatment of funeral rituality. She maintains, convincingly, that the government was less successful here than with births and weddings in co-opting ritual expression to further official atheist ideology. Funeral customs were the most conservative to begin with and the look into eternity afforded by a funeral prompted existential speculation to a much greater degree than in other ceremonies. The State, Rouhier-Willoughby declares, was not able to justify convincingly a dead person's life to his or her survivors by removing the supernatural element (life after death) and replacing it with a focus on the departed's deeds in this world (contributions to the collective and the state) except in cases of the country's "heroes": its war dead, cultural, scientific, and government elites.

The more conservative nature of funeral rituality leads Rouhier-Willoughby in now more, now less satisfying directions than in the case of birth and wedding rituality. I like her discussion of eating sweet food at funerals, a traditional custom maintained in Soviet times as a practice that, "allowed people to remember and mourn in yet another public way," but which, "also brought a small bit of pleasure along with it" (197). Here is a case of tracing connections between past and present, the continuity of the living and the dead, based on connecting beliefs and practices with sensual bodies. I find this appeal to the visceral a welcome change from the emphasis on "resistance" elsewhere. Elsewhere, however, I find the author too eager to ascribe spiritual motives to ritual actors: practices observed because the dead, according to traditional belief systems, required certain actions by the living. What individuals

and groups may or may not have “believed,” especially as reported decades after the fact, seems to me to be difficult to determine conclusively. Rouhier-Willoughby is more convincing where she, frequently, alludes to how practices executed ostensibly for the benefit of the dead helped the living cope, adapt, and renew ties of mutual support and obligation.

And yet, the tendency of survivors to come together and mourn as a collective is presented as, “a reaction against a society that did not provide adequately for its members. It emerged not from a desire to unite with the socialist collective for ideological reasons, but rather given the limitations on provisions and the monetary outlay required for such ceremonies, the ritual could not be properly performed without the help of friends and family” (217). I agree that ideology can hardly be as persuasive as tradition during the stress of a family member’s funeral. However, the notion of the proper observance of ritual being contingent upon to the availability of material good is, I believe, much more important in retrospect—post-Perestroika—than it would have been at the time. Time, and upheavals in economic systems, leads to changes in perspective and priorities. Rather, I believe that people come together always to mourn, to display a “communal ethos” because this act is comforting at the most fundamental level of shared humanity. It is, if you will “hard-wired” for humans. Collective action like this is rooted deeply in traditional practices, the very folkways that Rouhier-Willoughby so convincingly argues form an important component in modern urban folk practices. In addition to the possibility that it may have sometimes been a response of “resistance” to a government that did not provide essentials, the contributions of friends, co-workers and relatives with money, participation, and in kind should be seen as acts motivated by the desire to maintain this ancient custom through direct involvement in the process at every level possible: emotionally, physically, and materially.

There are a few troublesome statements, interpretations of data, and conclusions, such as where the author contends that difficulties associated with giving birth under Soviet conditions resulted in a mother developing strong bonds with their children (113). This could be true, but so could the opposite, and must surely depend of the personalities of the individuals involved. Certainly not all Soviet mothers developed strong bonds with their children.

Rouhier-Willoughby states in several places that the unofficial, private aspects of the wedding ceremony—the reception with friends and family—was much more important than the official component at the

bureau of records (ZAGS marriage palace), that the reception was the “core of the celebration” (165, 248). Perhaps, so, but the one could certainly not have taken place without the other. It would be perhaps fairer to say that the reception, with its acknowledgement of the new couple’s status change by friends, family, and neighbors was more important to Rouhier-Willoughby’s focus on the purpose and function of the wedding ritual complex as a way to negotiate identities and resist the State’s incursions into private life. The reception could certainly be perceived as being “more important” vis-à-vis the official ceremony based solely on the number of people involved in each—the couple, two witnesses, and a celebrant at ZAGS versus the much greater number attending the reception. However, I think it would be a mistake to attribute any relative degree of importance of the private part of the ceremony entirely to factors of “resistance.” The church ceremony in the pre-Soviet Russian village, as Rouhier-Willoughby herself observes, was also fairly “low-key” relative to the reception: parents, at any rate, did not generally go to church with the couple, but instead stayed home and prepared to receive the newlyweds.

And speaking of the wedding complex and pre-Soviet village practices, Rouhier-Willoughby does not explore an important component of coupling, one that has been extensively studied in traditional culture: courtship. Again, I do not mean that I find anything lacking in the present study but rather have in mind a direction for further research, perhaps based on the very same methodological approach as used here. Where and how did Soviet youths meet each other and fall in love? How were village customs of yearly-cycle celebrations like fall-winter work bees, Yuletide parties, and spring-summer outdoor festival observances transformed in the Soviet context?

Finally, I occasionally take issue with the author’s approach to translating Russian and Soviet words, concepts, and speech patterns. Rouhier-Willoughby sometimes goes too far, in my view, to preserve the syntax of her respondents. The results are awkwardly unidiomatic, even for colloquial usage. Speakers of Russian will smile at the author’s preservation of the syntax of Tania K’s speech:

They try, of course, when she is pregnant, then they try to go beyond the norm somehow, so that, well, they can create certain conditions for her, distinct from the conditions for other members of the family, they try then to buy her... to limit yourself then in something, but then to buy her farmer’s cheese, then to buy cheese, to buy fruits, which are very expensive for us, very with our salaries, well, they try, try to provide the woman with some kind of nutrition that is more or lessvaluable. (84)

But this is not quite idiomatic English, even for colloquial speech. Elsewhere the author refers to *oktiabrinny* celebrations without any explanatory gloss for the non-Russian-speaking reader. Finally, I believe that “the grapevine” is a more idiomatic rendering of Vera S’s term than “sarafan radio,” especially for interested folklorists and students of the social sciences without a background in Russian-Soviet issues (235).

The copy editing of this book, whether thanks to the author and her readers or the editor’s proofers, is outstanding. I saw no typos or misprints: would that all academic books these days were this well edited.

Village Values succeeds as an overview of mid- to late-Soviet and contemporary Russian urban life-cycle rituals. Raw data, in the form of interviews and the author’s personal observations are well synthesized with current ideas about identity, gender and resistance in a clearly-presented theoretical structure. I especially salute the work Rouhier-Willoughby has done to rehabilitate urban folklore in the context of contemporary social science. Both folklorists and social scientists should take notice. Perhaps the most important and remarkable conclusion to be drawn from the book is the observation that “a strengthening of the folk system generally,” is taking place currently in Russia (241).

John W. Hill
Ann Arbor, MI
USA