

Caldwell, Melissa L.: *Dacha Idylls: Living Organically in Russia's Countryside*, Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2011, 200 pp., \$26.95, ISBN 978-0-5202-6285-0

The book concentrates on a very important part of Russian culture and identity – life in dachas. Those seasonal or year-round countryside cottage houses of various sizes, located within cooperative-based communities, serve multiple purposes. Melissa L. Caldwell builds the book on an analysis of data obtained during her fieldwork realized in a dacha community located in proximity to Tver, a couple of hours from Moscow. Caldwell writes that the project is ‘*to provide a detailed ethnographic account of “dacha life” ... [and show how this lifestyle is an] ... in fact central, even ordinary, part of Russians’ everyday lives at the personal, community and even national levels*’ (4). What functions, then, do dachas pose in the Russian society?

The book is organized around a description of the dacha dichotomy, dating back to the classical Russian literature and Chechov’s nineteenth-century writings. On the one hand, on the individual level, dachas are the source of pleasures of being connected to nature, and on the other there are the hardships of physical work and many discomforts. In the book, dachas are a place containing dynamic and interfering processes, and the author shows how the dacha is a phenomenological experience where ‘*pleasure and pain, joy and misery are inextricably linked*’ (46). Caldwell elaborates in detail how on the personal level, hard, exhausting work in the countryside can be treated as leisure and as a way of achieving personal freedom: the simplicity of life and fully autonomous character of this physical exercise while working allows the tired soul (*dusha*) to rest.

Nevertheless, the seemingly stress-free life at the dacha can be a source of many community-level frictions connected to the performance of dacha rituals, planning or timekeeping. Being a *dachnik* goes beyond the site of the garden and extends to the general lifestyle in the city (while not in dacha), food habits and social ties. For instance, Caldwell shows how important non-industrial foods are for Russians, how important dachas are in food production, and at the same time proves how different the understanding of healthy and natural food is from what we know from American-European food movements.

Finally, Caldwell is able to move the discussion of dachas to the macro level. The author elaborates on the issue of democracy in Russia from the perspective of dachas, which, as Caldwell argues, are a place where democratic ideals are visible. Caldwell touches issues such as freedom, autonomy, liberty, and civic responsibility, in contrast to anonymous, individualized big cities. Caldwell also puts the dacha life in the context of social change in Russia. She argues that capitalist development,

privatization, and urbanization are potential threats for the peaceful and traditional dacha lifestyle. The change is embedded not only in modernization and technological development, but also in partitioning of common areas. In woods common walking paths are destroyed. Private gardens, formerly open, are increasingly restricted from public access. New buyers, constructions invading the landscape, and emerging fences around cottage houses are a serious threat for the established social order. In the words of Caldwell's respondents, all this is killing the community spirit.

In the text, the author's extensive knowledge of Russia's everyday life is visible on every page. The stories and anecdotes that fill the book and illustrate Caldwell's arguments make *Dacha Idylls* very pleasant to read. *Dacha Idylls*, however, is not about stories. The book contains a very well-written analysis constructed by a mixture of observations from the field and excellent material acquired in the field. Caldwell's theoretical approach responds to the work of authors such as Michael Herzfeld, Chris Hann, Katherine Verdery, and Jennifer Patico.

The book itself also provides a number of clarifications which are an important contribution to the state of the art. For instance, the book title contains the word 'organic', which seems better suited to the Western, mostly Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. However, in chapter four, Caldwell provides a very convincing line of defense for using the term, based on a sociological comparison between Russia's 'ecologically clean' (*ekologicheskii chistoe*) food and the Western 'organic movement'. In this part the author places a clear and satisfying emphasis on the difference between two contexts. Caldwell argues that *chistoe* is not a countercultural 'green' movement; neither it is about issues regarding ethical labor practices; nor has a certification system; and the distribution is mostly personal. The concept is related to nostalgia, heritage, and tradition, especially to collective memory of periods of hardship when natural foods served as the basic source of nutrition. In today's Russia, ecological products serve as a supplemental source of food and come mostly from private gardens.

The book will be interesting not only for scholars working on Russia. As dachas are an important sphere of Eastern European societies, from the former East Germany to Russia, some of the book's observations and conclusions might be found useful regarding a variety of post-Socialist countries. Due to its accessible form, some excerpts of the book can be recommended to undergraduate students of Eastern European and Slavic studies. The whole perspective of the book, including the role of the nature in Russia's society and the earlier-mentioned alternative understandings of 'organic foods', might also make the volume attractive to anthropologists and sociologists of food.

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