

# Villagers and Dachniki in Post-soviet Russia: A Complex Relation

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## Chapter Twelve

### Villagers and *Dachniki* in Post-soviet Russia: A Complex Relation

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#### **Introduction**

One of the consequences of de-collectivisation has been an increase in the number of dachas in Russia, even if they have existed for a long time (Lovell 2003). Several forms can be pointed out in the villages: inherited old peasant houses (*isba*), old houses bought by workers or employees, new houses built by wealthy people. This population working in towns is either native to the village or its surroundings (either themselves or their parents), or came by way of relationships with other *dachniki* or villagers. Although this is changing with the development of new housing markets, a newcomer to a village usually has some connection with someone who is already a member of the community – either another *dachnik* or a villager. Moreover, this population of second home owners represents a wide range of professions and positions in society, which reflects the fact that some people have inherited or bought an old *isba* whilst others have built new wood or brick houses, the size depending on their wealth. These people maintain or develop new relationships with the locals on the basis of family networks and the exchange of services amongst the *dachniki* and/or between the *dachniki* and the villagers.

Dachas play a significant role in the life of the *dachniki* and influence their organisation of time and their conception of life and family. If travelling, the family, gardening and the upkeep of the dacha consume most of the *dachniki's* time, they also interact a lot with other *dachniki* and villagers. The nature of these interactions can be economic or cultural. *Because of their presence, they* interact with the rural world and help to change it: the needs of the *dachniki* create new job opportunities, but they also influence the way villagers look at their cultural heritage. However, such change cannot happen without generating a degree of tension.

The fieldwork was undertaken around Yaroslavl<sup>1</sup> and Rybinsk among a population of *dachniki* owning houses in allotments (Ortar 2005) and villages, using a social anthropological approach. The fieldwork was conducted in two villages and three collective gardens<sup>1</sup> (*kolektivnye sady*) in the summers of 1999-2003. Altogether, I stayed with five different families in two villages and two collective gardens. I returned every year in order to be able to follow the lives of the people I had met and observe any changes. Over this period, I conducted thirty-five interviews, mostly with *dachniki*, but also with villagers. Most of them were made while staying in villages and collective gardens, but I also made ten interviews while visiting other dachas and allotments around Yaroslavl<sup>1</sup>. I also interviewed ten families both at their dachas and at their flats or offices in the city in order to observe different aspects of their life. To complete the picture, I conducted five interviews with town or transport planners and architects.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more precise definition of the collective gardens see Lovell (2003) or Traven (2005). This aspect of the research will not be under discussion in this paper.

Rybinsk (234,000 inhabitants) is located in Yaroslavl' *oblast*, around 350 kilometres north east of Moscow, over the river Volga. Rybinsk was renowned for its airplane-engine factories and has been strongly affected by unemployment over the last fifteen years. Yaroslavl' (600,000 inhabitants) is the main city of the area and has been less affected by unemployment. A knowledge of the urban context furnishes some keys to understanding the role of the dacha. Indeed, the development of these two cities has followed rigid urbanisation patterns. In Rybinsk, plans for the region were conceived at the beginning of the 1930s when the city had only 100,000 inhabitants. At that time, the plans envisaged a city of 700,000 inhabitants, a size never reached. The agglomeration stretches over twenty kilometres along the Volga-river. Land was allotted to companies which built residential buildings for their employees according to pre-established plans, repeated *ad infinitum*.<sup>2</sup> Whole districts composed exclusively of buildings of seven to twelve storeys, divided into flats looking all alike, were built around the factories without any overall coherence. Consequently, residential areas can be located several kilometres away from the town centre. *Isba* belonging to old villages, forested areas, fields, and waste land remain between these districts. In some of these areas, individual houses and new buildings dedicated to Russia's new upper class are beginning to be built. Yaroslavl' has been developed according to a town-plan similar to that of Rybinsk. Therefore, much time and energy is devoted to commuting to and from work every day. In this urban, work-related context, dachas are places of rest, relative freedom and somewhere for people to work in their gardens.

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<sup>2</sup> Architects could choose between two types of buildings.

The collective gardens and villages where I stayed were located around these two towns. In the villages, *dachniki* from a wide social spectrum live together. This is a feature of the countryside. The *dachniki* I interviewed ranged from unemployed people to employed workers in unskilled jobs with poor living standards to well-off business men and women, doctors, and teachers working in international schools. The poorer *dachniki* live in towns close by except when the house is inherited, the more well-to-do *dachniki* live either in Yaroslavl', Moscow or Saint Petersburg.

### **Dacha time organisation**

In spite of the fact that recent development of dachas in rural areas is closely linked to food shortages and the emergence of a desire for space, second home ownership and a country life, the phenomenon of occasional commuting between rural and urban spaces (*maâtnikovaâ migratsiâ*) has been known and studied by sociologists such as Basil Kerblay (1973, 1985) for quite a long time. However, most of the research on dachas has been conducted since 1990. Ronan Hervouet (2003) has studied *kolektivnye sady* in Belarus and Jane Zavisca (2003) has studied dachas in a medium-sized central Russian city. Both, as well as Nathalie Ortar (2005), were influenced by Simon Clarke's (2000) research on the dachas' economic role. Apart from Simon Clarke, this economic role has also been analysed by Richard Rose and Evgeny Tikhomirov (1993), Ronan Hervouet (2003), Jane Zavisca (2003) and Nathalie Ortar (2005) in their attempt to understand the broader meaning of the dacha. This aspect will not be specifically analysed in this article. Two research works conducted with a historical approach must also be mentioned: those of Stephen Lovell (2003) and Vlada Traven (2005). Both

contribute to the understanding of the origins of the different forms of dachas that can be observed today.

Residential migrations between the city and the country can be of two types. If the dacha is located nearby, trips to the dacha do not have a seasonal character: city-dwellers favour short but frequent trips or weekends, as long as the weather is good enough. Some even visit their dachas in the winter. In contrast, when the second home is far from the main residence, the commuting journey is made over a long distance. In this case, trips to the dacha preserve both their holiday character, and their long duration (several weeks or months at a time). Trips to the dacha also depend on the fact that the residence may be shared by more than two generations.

Several factors lie behind the evolution of people's trips to their dacha, this back and forth movement between urban and rural spaces. The most important factor is simply the economic means at people's disposal. Then the various means of transport available and the quality of the road network determine distance thresholds. The distance to the dacha also determines the various uses to which it is put. The distances people travel to their dachas varies enormously from some dozens of kilometres for the inhabitants of small- and medium-sized cities, to hundreds of kilometres for residents of regional and national capitals such as Moscow or Yaroslavl'. It should be noted, however, that substantial increases in the price of petrol recently and, therefore, in travel costs has served to encourage people to spend more time at their dachas. M. and Mrs B., a couple of workers, live in Saint Petersburg and have a house near Rybinsk, which was bought from family members. During the 1980s, they used to come by car not only for the

summer holidays but also for shorter visits of between three days and one week. The economic recession obliged them to sell their car and travel by train: now as a result they come only during the summer but they stay longer. They save up all their annual leave for this one summer holiday, except for a visit with their son in his car, at the beginning of spring to plant seeds in the garden.

As mentioned above, the question of the garden and its use is central to understanding the dacha and its evolution. For example, in 1999 it was unthinkable not to cultivate the garden oneself or give it to a poorer family member. A rich Muscovite owner of a second home around Rybinsk left the garden, rather condescendingly, to her sister to grow potatoes. On the same estate, owned by the elite of the city, flowers were rare. However, three years later, beds of flowers had appeared replacing the seedlings of potatoes and gherkins, and the gardens known as Alpine or Japanese gardens are a veritable success. Other vegetables and berries persist but are more discrete and have acquired a certain social status. If such changes can be noticed among wealthy people, for others, especially those on low salaries and pensioners (Rimachevskaja 1997), growing vegetables are still an indispensable part of their lives (Ortar 2005). So, depending on the wealth of the person who owns them, dachas may be interpreted as sites of consumption or of production, economic necessities or status symbols (Zavisca 2003).

### **The rural residence: a reference point for lifestyles**

The phenomenon of the dacha in rural areas says a lot about the potential of rural space to appear as a central point of reference for lifestyles. A sense of belonging to the

rural world is then claimed. If it is true that both one's professional life and part of one's social life are located in the city, we can only grasp the essence of both when the rural dimension is taken into account. This link with the rural environment and the effect it is seen to have on one's identity holds true whether the dacha was inherited, or was purchased a community to which one had no previous family ties (Ortar 2004). Nevertheless, the prior existence of a family presence seems, in a *de facto* fashion, to justify such composition of identity as can be noticed in other countries, in France for example (Ortar 1999, Perrot 1998). However, the same can be said when a second home is purchased in a village where there is a pre-existing network of family relations. Therefore, the conceptual dimension of roots appears very rapidly in speech. When considering the importance of an identity revealing itself through speech, one also has to take into account the ways in which family memory is built. Anne Muxel (1996) points to the importance and productivity of the presence of holiday recollections, which take up the greater part of the space available to one's memory, even when holidays represent only a short period compared to the time taken up by one's daily routine. However, these periods correspond to time spent together. In this rural "unity" of the family, which can be contrasted with the "dispersion" of the city (Gotman & Léger 1999), the beginning of an explanation for the incapacity of the city to confer legitimate territorial identities can be found.

The importance given to the rural world gives way to new strategies developed for maintaining contacts. First of all they take the form of a purchase or additional rental for children, relatives or friends. Within a territory where the family has no ties of origins,



this can bring family members together, including sometimes a couple's first cousins. In order to avoid discord, relatives can also invest either in building land, or in restorable houses, so that every sibling can possess his own home in the future, while at the same time giving the family the chance to protect its integrity. For example the K. bought a piece of land to build a dacha in 1996. In 2002, they started looking for two other parcels of land in the same village in order to be able to build two houses for their sons one day.

Acquisition can also be a strategy to increase a family's wealth as in the case of the M., a working-class family. The parents had a parcel in a dacha allotment. One of the sons obtained another one, which was a long way from his home. The two gardens were sold to buy a parcel twice as big in a village within reach by bus. The M. built two houses there — which would have been impossible in the old allotments — where wives and children spend the summer growing vegetables. These kitchen gardens are vital for the brothers who each have three children. Nevertheless, thanks to the deployed strategies and the work of each family member, this family, whose income has remained constant and therefore modest, has an environment offering a real quality of life and has considerably increased its capital. This is only one example among many of the real estate strategies implemented around second homes, which are of both a financial and symbolic nature, revealing the complexity of the connections elaborated by the *dachniki*.

### **Exchanges in the environment of the second home**

The presence of the *dachniki* and the frequency and length of their visits are the source of a variety of exchanges between them and other *dachniki* and villagers which contribute to the revitalization of the countryside.

### **Economic exchanges**

The contacts that emerge between the *dachniki* and local villagers often take the form of an exchange of paid services. This injection of capital stimulates the local economy. *Dachas* — which are for the most part left uninhabited during Russia's long winter — benefit from minor repair work or from improvements thanks to the year-round residents of the village. These local year-round residents thus help maintain the houses and also guard them in the winter in order to reduce the risk of burglary. Flowers and vegetables are planted in the spring. When the *dachniki* visit on holiday, the locals provide them with various foodstuffs: Mrs N., a widowed teacher, sells milk from her cow to several families during their visit; the T. also provides the K. with milk and sells what they gather (e.g. mushrooms and berries) and also helps out in other ways. Not all these services and goods are paid for with money. Instead, they can be paid for in the form of gifts of vodka, second-hand clothes, courses given to children, or help in finding somewhere to live when one of the children goes away to study.

However, in many cases the *dachniki* do pay for these services and goods with money, which provides an important source of income for many unemployed or underemployed locals. It is interesting to note that after the fall of communism, some

Russians left the cities to live in the countryside, sometimes in an *isba* belonging to their parents, hoping to find a better standard of living. M. B. is one such person. Unemployed for several years, he has started a new life by planting potatoes and onions in his parents' field, which had been left unexploited for several years. He and his family moved back to town during the winter when he tried to find work as a private policeman. To improve his income he also started to work as a mason for people who wanted to build a dacha. This activity has become so profitable that it now occupies all his time, providing him with an income for his family.

Revitalising the countryside has a very marked seasonal character in Russia. Nevertheless, it is characterized by the consolidation of existing commercial networks and by the creation and development of the various sectors involved in building and restoration. For example, several of the *dachniki* observed hired the services of a mason skilled in building old fashion stoves, and/or a wood-carver and a joiner. This trend can also be seen in the remarkable development of retail outlets for building materials.

Ties can also be of a more complex form linking the *dachniki* to each other. Among the multiple ties that bind secondary residents to dwellings, as well as binding the *dachniki* to each other, like between the *dachniki* and the villagers, a certain number are expressed in the form of an informal economy, within a system of renewed debt. The exchange of services is rarely paid for, and it can assume extremely different forms. For instance, it can correspond to the transport of the family to and from the dacha: Mrs I. is regularly driven by friends to her dacha, which she bought with their help. She had given free courses to their son in order to help him enter to medical school a few years

earlier. Car-pooling, arranged among friends or relatives, is rarely done on the basis of a money payment. An obligation incurred can very well correspond to the repayment of another debt. Local acquaintances go well beyond the framework of the second home, to exercise their influence in helping to enroll children in a school, find work placement, or provide on the job assistance for adults during periods of unemployment. The strength and the number of these ties are as old as the second homes themselves. They bear witness to the importance of the second home as a place of exchange and contact between groups which would not meet outside this context.

### **Cultural exchanges**

Social relationships between *dachniki* and local people do indeed contribute to the development of territorial (regional or local), social and occupational identity. Social players are consolidated and fixed in roles which are established initially in informal exchanges and daily contacts and then given concrete expression by a network of interpersonal relations, notably through sponsorships and referrals. These same social identities are reaffirmed through the organization of social events or activities having a symbolic and unifying character.

Certain forms of social exchange are new. For example, in the hamlet of Velikovo, in a rural district of the region of Yaroslavl, city residents who have bought old *isbas* in order to restore them as second homes, share an area adjoining an established rural population which is not very mobile. These city residents, without any experience of working the land, or of crops, benefit from the advice and know-how offered by their older neighbours, who can advise them on the choice of plant strains, and the orientation

and the rhythm of crops. In return, the *dachniki* bring seeds and grain, which are still difficult to find in small rural markets, to the village.

Social exchange is also encouraged through the practice of buying supplies together. The absence of a local grocer's shop, or if there is one, its inability to meet all the local needs, promotes practices of mutual aid which include both car-pooling for travel to larger urban centres, and shopping done for nearby neighbours and/or friends. The totality of these relationships added to the various types of exchanged services actually forms a tight network of mutual aid and mutual debt that binds temporary and permanent residents together.

The renewal of social exchange in the countryside is also accomplished through the exchange of symbolic possessions. Permanent residents transfer not only some of their historical and cultural knowledge of the area to the *dachniki*, but also the legitimacy of territorial membership. In return, permanent residents receive the added value conferred on them through the interest developed by urban residents in the rural way of life, which was formerly abandoned or belittled. These symbolic exchanges occur within a general context of a search for stable reference points of identity in modern ever-changing European societies (Ortar 2004). One of these examples was the rebuilding of a village church financed by wealthy *dachniki*. By rebuilding a wooden church in the old style, the aim was to revive the church in order to give back what was perceived as the village's unity.

### Conflicts and tensions

The rural character of this social exchange expresses itself through making acquaintances, which is useful for cementing social ties. People come to the country to find this type of relation: it is this aspect which is sought by the *second home owners* as much as by the permanent, new, and established residents, and which is especially valued in the verbal expression of our interviewees. However, it is not expressed without constraints or tensions. A tacit obligation is imposed upon the newcomer to adhere to the network, at the risk of being stigmatised as a person who refuses to play according to the rules of the game. *As for the secondary residents*, it is also interesting to note that their integration is also measured by their involvement in local rural life. To remain an outsider, to refuse to get involved in an activity, not to be available for a festival or for a service, is to be met at once with disapproval, while subscribing to village social exchange — through creating social ties or through benefiting from an established network of family or friends — allows the *dachniki* to be closer to the group of permanent residents.

The relationships that the two communities maintain allow them to express their vital economic, social and political interests, as well as those pertaining to their identity. These interests can generate tensions, as well as the permanent search for balance. Therefore, *the Russian secondary residents* are easily accepted in villages when they come to occupy houses that have been abandoned, as long as there is no competition among the holidaymakers and suburbanites over the same real estate. Tensions are, however, revealed by the ambivalent way in which each community perceives the

others. Indeed, permanent and secondary residents constantly criticize each other while at the same time maintaining daily, and varied, cordial personal relationships with members of the incriminated community. So, the forms of social exchange actually experienced reveal that social practices can widely deviate from ideal models.

One of the limits of mutual social relationships lies in the competitiveness that can crop up among different groups. If competitiveness appears between locals and *dachniki* during fights over political interests, it also occurs among *dachniki* for access to the territory and to its use.

In the region of Rybinsk, the *dachniki* who have already become established members of the village community are trying to slow or to oppose the influx of new residents by using their influence in the rural land council. By mobilising their network of acquaintances within it, they intervene so that plots of land that are still available are allocated to individuals of their choosing or "even reserved" for their own personal projects, whether these are practical in the medium- or long-term future. M. K. bought a plot through a friend who wanted to thank him for having put up his son in Moscow. A few years later, M. K. was informed that new land will be put on sale. The family of his friend is interested as is he himself, for his children. However, as he cannot pay at the time, the authorities agreed to freeze the sale until such time as he could afford the first instalment.

Conflicts of interest may also arise over different uses of the land and its attribution. Existing tensions over access to the land have taken on more of an economic than a political character. As access to these leases is very widely granted on a paying basis, it

favours the development of corruption, which accompanies the mobilization of support and sponsoring. The beneficiaries of this corruption, local and regional civil servants, are also responsible for land surveying, and take advantage of the rivalry which develops among secondary residents, while ensuring their own power.

### **Conclusion**

The relationships between *dachniki* and villagers are very intricate and are not devoid of tensions. The uses and representations of rural space are associated with the contemporary material interests or clearly symbolic interests which refer to family destinies, such as in individual or village histories by means of an effort of memory (Zonabend 1988). If a renewal of rural social exchange can be observed, it is also because the social players, whether rural or urban, permanent or secondary, share the same source of common cultural representations, which find their basis in the rural past of the Russian population.

The State facilities lodging access: houses and apartments available for rent or for purchase, old *isba* belonging to the family (Prokofieva, Grichanov & Kortchagina 2003), and while in the city dwellings remain rather rare and expensive. An initial migratory movement, at the beginning of the 1990s, was regarded as the first sign of re-urbanization. However, since living conditions in the cities have improved, large parts of the rural population have returned there. During the late 1990s, only those who were not able to find another solution continued to commute daily between the city and the countryside (Lezean 1997). However, since the beginning of 2000, along with the continuing improvement of living conditions, people are once again attracted to the



countryside. These people are wealthier than those of the first wave, and tend to keep their jobs in the city. The starting point for this new suburbanisation is either a dacha or a village first used by the *dachniki* and still used as a summer residence for some and full-time residence for others: a situation which also depends greatly on the state of the road network. Dacha and suburbanisation are becoming more and more intricate and a new way of using rural land is appearing in Russia.

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