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Waiting to Die? Old Age in the Late Imperial Russian Village

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Abstract

What was daily life like for old people in Russian villages at the turn of the twentieth century? Elderly people feature as an integral part of Russian rural family life in literary and in scholarly accounts, and are predominantly framed as able, skilled, omniscient community members. This article suggests that constructions of old age that see the elderly retaining physical prowess and community leadership overlook the lived realities of ageing. As elderly people lost physical and mental capacity, they slipped out of view in the Russian village, desexed, unseen and unremarked. The experience of the frail elderly allows us to explore the values accorded individuals within rural communities, and the extent to which families, communities and legal structures could and did intervene in the private sphere.

Keywords: Russian history; history of ageing; peasant studies; nineteenth century; rural life

Introduction

‘Oh, Ivan Petrovich, the time has passed when there was strength and health. How was it then? You work, you eat, you rest, and then you begin again anew; but now it’s not like that: every little bit of you hurts ... God forbid you live to see such days, it is better to die while your legs are still working!’

(Conversation between two old men reported by the teacher Vasiliĭ Ivanovich Ivanov in Novgorod province, 1898–9)¹

¹ D. A. Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane. Zhizn', byt, nravy. Materialy 'Etnograficheskogo biuro' kniazia V.N. Tenisheva* (14 vols., St Petersburg, 2005–11), vii.1. 85.

This reported fragment of conversation, in which the speaker bemoaned the pains of old age, resonates across time and space. This article seeks to contribute to our understandings of old age in historical context through its focus on the experiences of and perceptions about older people in late Imperial Russian villages. Elderly people feature as an integral part of Russian rural family life in literary and in scholarly accounts, and are predominantly framed as able, skilled, omniscient community members.² The idea that the most powerful actors in village communal life and politics were old men (*stariki*) is enduring, but these constructions of old age that see the elderly retaining physical prowess and community leadership overlook the lived realities of ageing.³ As elderly people lost physical and mental capacity, they slipped out of view in the Russian village, desexed, unseen and unremarked. The experience of the frail elderly allows us to explore the values accorded individuals within rural communities, and the extent to which families, communities and legal structures could and did intervene in the private sphere.

A rich scholarship on the experience of older people in different chronological and spatial contexts has established that there was no universal respect for old people at any time, even though respect for elders was a universal aspect of religious thought and folkloric myths. Attitudes towards old age were consistently ambivalent, incorporating respect for wisdom and maturity alongside pity and even revulsion at the illustration of inexorable time.⁴ While the history of childhood in Russia has generated a significant body of work, and old age in Soviet Russia is an emerging field, old people are largely absent in the scholarship on rural spaces in Imperial Russia.⁵ The last, debilitated stages of old age have been neglected in the broader scholarship

² See for example Lev Tolstoy's account of an elderly peasant mowing, in *Anna Karenina*, pt 3, ch. 5. Tolstoy insisted on the dignity and importance of old age and was preoccupied with both the ageing process and with death. See Stephen Lovell, 'Finitude at the Fin de Siècle: Il'ia Mechnikov and Lev Tolstoy on Death and Life', *The Russian Review*, 63 (2004), 296–316, esp. 297, 303.

³ Boris Mironov, 'The Russian Peasant Commune after the Reforms of the 1860s', *Slavic Review*, 44 (1985), 447.

⁴ Pat Thane, 'Old Age in European Cultures: A Significant Presence from Antiquity to the Present', *The American Historical Review*, 125 (2020), 385–95, at 387; Thijs Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England: A Cultural History* (Woodbridge, 2019), pp. 6–7.

⁵ See Elizabeth White, *A Modern History of Russian Childhood: From the Late Imperial Period to the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (2020) for a survey treatment of Russian childhood. Recent works on Soviet ageing include Alissa Klots and Maria Romashova, 'Young Minds – Young Bodies: The Emotional and the Physical in the Late Soviet Discourse on Aging', *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 48, no. 2 (2021), 189–210; Susan Grant and Isaac McKean Scarborough (eds.), *Geriatrics and Ageing in the Soviet Union* (2023). Scholarship on old age in the Russian Empire includes Adele Lindenmeyr, 'Work, Charity, and the Elderly in Late-Nineteenth-Century Russia', in *Old Age in Preindustrial Society*, ed. Peter N. Stearns (New York, 1982), 232–48; Aleksandr A. Panchenko, 'Obraz starosti v Russkoi krest'ianskoi kul'ture', *Otechestvennyi zapiski*, 3 (2005); Z. Z. Mukhina, *Ruskaia krest'ianka v poreformennyi period: vtoraiia polovina XIX – nachalo XX veka* (St Petersburg, 2018), 389–401, 441–73. A recent and excellent synthetic study of family and household in Russia has no indexed references to old age or elderly people, but fifty-one references to children: Barbara Alpern Engel, *Marriage, Household and Home in Modern Russia: From Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin* (New York, 2021).

as well.⁶ This article considers a group who face a series of intersecting marginalisations in historical discourse, as lower-class, rural, elderly people. This article does not aspire to offer a model of ‘typical’ old age in pre-modern societies, or indeed in Imperial Russia. Old people were not a uniform category: their experiences were gradated by gender, by wealth and privilege, by race and ethnicity and cultural norms, and by the individual circumstances of their lives. Old people are represented, and represent themselves, in multiple ways, both as individuals and as a group.⁷ This article recognises that experiences of old age were diverse, and that old age was both a process and a destination.

This article is based around fourteen published volumes of material collected by Prince Tenishev’s ethnographic bureau between 1898 and 1901, including survey responses from 167 correspondents in thirteen provinces of central Russia.⁸ Tenishev commissioned responses to a detailed questionnaire about rural life among ethnically Russian peasants of Orthodox faith from local correspondents in Russia’s central and northern regions.⁹ The material in this article reflects the social and cultural spaces of the Slavic, Orthodox, ethnically Russian rural dwellers of the Russian Empire, who made up a minority of the Empire’s richly diverse rural population.¹⁰ While the questions posed in Tenishev’s survey anticipated and shaped correspondents’ responses, this article’s focus on old age to some extent confounds Tenishev’s scripts, given that old age, unlike say popular justice, or violence, was not intended as a focus.¹¹ Correspondents’ accounts are certainly partial, constructed and flawed, but they nevertheless offer us glimpses into otherwise inaccessible spaces of private homes and family practice.¹²

This paper asks a series of intersecting research questions. The first section tackles the challenge of how to define old age, and at what stage old age begins. The second section explores societal constructions and hierarchies around ageing people in their ‘third age’; that is, those older people who are still physically active and engaged in the community’s economic, social and

⁶ Susannah Ottaway, ‘Medicine and Old Age’, in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine*, ed. Mark Jackson (Oxford, 2012), 338, 349.

⁷ Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford, 2000), 271.

⁸ These thirteen provinces were Kaluga, Kostroma, Kursk, Moscow, Nizhnii Novgorod, Novgorod, Olonets, Pskov, St Petersburg, Tver, Tula, Vologda and Yaroslavl. Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest’iane*, 1, 6–7.

⁹ For the published questionnaire, see V. N. Tenishev, *Programma etnograficheskikh svedenii o krest’ianakh tsentral’noi Rossii* (Smolensk, 1898). For a discussion of the challenges around its publication, see L. S. Zhuravleva, ‘K Istorii Publikatsii “Programma” V. N. Tenisheva’, *Sovetskaia Etnografiia*, 1 (1979), 122–3.

¹⁰ Of the population of the Russian Empire, 44 per cent were categorised as ‘Russian’ (by virtue of language use), and 69 per cent professed practice of Eastern Orthodox religious faith. Data drawn from *Pervaia obshchaia perepis’ naseleniia Rossiiskoi Imperii 1897g. v. 89 tomakh* (St Petersburg, 1897).

¹¹ Dmitry Baranov, ‘V. N. Tenishev’s “Peasant” Programme: Ideology and Practice’, *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 3 (2007), 193–205, esp. 195, 197, 200.

¹² For further discussion of the challenges of ethnography as a historical source, see Sarah Badcock, ‘Time out from the Daily Grind: Peasant Rest in Late Imperial Rural Russia’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 100 (2022), 674–704, at 680–1.

cultural life.¹³ This looks at respect and power for older people in the community, and the moral, cultural and working roles taken on by older people in the community. The final section looks at the so called fourth age, or the ‘oldest old’, a term coined to describe the combination of chronology and chronic illness that betokens the terminal phase of people’s lives.¹⁴ This section starts by discussing attempts by older people to exercise agency in preparing for their ‘fourth age’. It then goes on to look at the care afforded the oldest old, in the community, and in the family.

When does old age begin?

Peasant men and women in our area begin to grow old noticeably around the age of sixty, but continue to work, lighter peasant work, until disease puts them to bed, and death puts them in the ground. The death of peasants and peasant women in our area is around seventy: but diseases cause death earlier, and there are old people who live to eighty years, and in rare cases till eighty-five or ninety.
(Savva Yakovlevich Derunov, peasant from Yaroslavl province)¹⁵

There was no universally accepted demarcation for the beginning of old age: while chronological age offers a relatively fixed defining point, old age is often societally recognised and defined by fitness to work, by appearance and by debility.¹⁶ Old age is a ‘state of becoming’ rather than an achieved identity, and is directly connected to senescence, the biological process of physical deterioration through ageing.¹⁷ Historians have adapted a range of models to define old age.¹⁸ The two definitions that emerge as most useful for this article are ‘chronological age’, whereby individuals are categorised as old when they have lived for a certain number of years, and ‘functional age’, when an individual is considered old when they are no longer able to perform specific work-based tasks.¹⁹ Chronological age provides a useful starting point but does not

¹³ Paul Higgs and Chris Gilleard, ‘Fourth Ageism: Real and Imaginary Old Age’, *Societies*, 11 (2021), 12; Peter Laslett, ‘The Emergence of the Third Age’, *Ageing and Society*, 7 (1987), 133–60.

¹⁴ Higgs and Gilleard, ‘Fourth Ageism’.

¹⁵ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest’iane*, II.1, 548.

¹⁶ Sophie Newman *et al.*, ‘Growing Old in the Industrial Age: Aging, Health, and Social Identity in Elderly Women (Eighteenth–Nineteenth Centuries A.D.)’, *Bioarchaeology International*, May 2023. <https://doi.org/10.5744/bi.2023.0003>.

¹⁷ Rebecca L. Gowland, ‘That “Tattered coat upon a stick”: The Ageing Body: Evidence for Elder Marginalisation and Abuse in Roman Britain’, in *Care in the Past: Archaeological and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Lindsay Powell, William Southwell-Wright and Rebecca Gowland (Havertown, 2016), 72.

¹⁸ Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 24. Bourdelais points to the chronological age of sixty as a starting point for old age in French contexts: Patrice Bourdelais, ‘Demographic Aging: A Notion to Revisit’, *The History of the Family*, 4 (1999), 31–50.

¹⁹ Paul Johnson, ‘Historical Readings of Old Age and Ageing’, in *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity*, ed. Pat Thane (1998), 4; for medieval use of functional age, see ‘Afterword’, in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe: Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the Centre for Medieval Studies*, Papers in Mediaeval Studies, 11 (Toronto, 1990), 204–5.

adequately encapsulate working parameters and experiences of old age. The highly elastic construction of ‘functional age’ – that is, if you were unable to work, you were ‘already old’ – is the dominant framing of old age in our material.²⁰ This elasticity is reflected in the Tenishev correspondents’ responses to the question of when old age begins, which produced a broad range of answers, and which unfailingly offered a gendered distinction: women were likely to become unfit for work younger, but to live longer.

Very low life expectancy levels obscure the lived demographics of late Imperial Russia, as they did in multiple other historical contexts.²¹ High infant mortality drastically lowered average life expectancy figures, and these figures can give an erroneous impression that old people were a rarity in late Imperial rural life. In 1897, the average life expectancy in Russia was a little under thirty for men, and around thirty-two for women. If we look at the data of life expectancy for a forty-year-old person, life expectancy shot up to around sixty-seven for men and women.²² These figures reflect the very high chance of death in infancy and early childhood; 250 out of every 1,000 babies did not survive their first year, a rate significantly higher than in other European countries.²³ The 1897 census indicated that elderly people made up around 7 per cent of the population, and that there was no significant disparity between men and women, which correlated with data from Western European countries.²⁴

The most commonly cited age for the onset of old age in the Tenishev survey was around sixty-five to seventy, though different correspondents offered widely digressing start points for decrepitude, from forty-five to seventyplus.²⁵ This figure corresponded with broader European trends, which saw old age as beginning in the seventh decade of life.²⁶ Some accounts of health and ageing in the villages pointed to high levels of vivacity and competence, and retention of working faculty, into advanced years. A. Mirets-Imshinetskii from Tver province recounted that old men and women in his parish were strong and adroit into advanced old age. ‘Even elders in their seventies work perfectly vigorously in the field.’²⁷ The nobleman Aleksei Alekseevich Fomin reported that decrepitude did not usually affect the older people in his experience of Yaroslavl province, and that only one ninety-year-old in the whole village was not able to work. In most cases, old men and women continued to work ‘until they died’, even in their seventies and eighties.²⁸

²⁰ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, II.1, 344.

²¹ Thane, ‘Old Age in European Cultures’, 386. For a discussion of the question in early medieval England, see Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 4.

²² N. E. Pashintseva, E. V. Voronina and L. A. Kazachenko (eds.), *Naselenie Rossii za sto let (1897–1997). Statisticheskii sbornik* (Moscow, 1998), 166–70.

²³ Timur Natkhov and Natalia Vasilenok, ‘Ethnic-specific Infant Care Practices and Infant Mortality in Late Imperial Russia’, *Economic History Review*, 76 (2022), 783–806.

²⁴ Lindenmeyr, ‘Work, Charity, and the Elderly’, 233.

²⁵ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, I, 416.

²⁶ Thane, ‘Old Age in European Cultures’, 394.

²⁷ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, I, 409

²⁸ *Ibid.*, II.2, 261.

Migrant workers were more likely to die prematurely, and those that returned permanently to village life after a stint of urban life were more likely to have damaged health, and to age prematurely. This reflected the ways in which the timing of physical decline is connected to cultural, social and economic contexts.²⁹ Barbara Engel's study of out-migration in Kostroma province attributed this premature ageing to poor living and working conditions.³⁰ A number of Tenishev's correspondents corroborate Engel's analysis.³¹ The experience of reduced longevity and reduced quality of life in migrant factory workers is reported in other global industrialising contexts.³² The reduced longevity and more rapid descent to frailty experienced by factory workers reinforces the overall point that chronological age does not adequately encapsulate the shape and space of ageing.

The place of older people (culture, power, work)

In social histories of the late Imperial Russian village, older men and women have been placed at the head of their households and their communities, in what are widely recognised to be patriarchal power structures. The scholarship has tended to emphasise gender as the primary organising factor in village power relationships, followed by generation.³³ Gender and seniority, along with wealth and status, defined individuals' positions in their family and in their community. Men dominated power structures, and senior women had power and authority over younger women within their household.³⁴ For women, status was associated with wealth and with bearing and rearing children.³⁵ Elder men and women, the *bol'shak* and *bol'shuka*, had massive authority in the household and directed daily economic and social life in the home.³⁶ The senior man and woman (*khoziain* and *khoziaka*) were fully empowered heads of the family, though the senior woman was subservient to men in her household.³⁷ In communities with high levels of male out-migration, older women participated in the management and

²⁹ Rebecca Gowland, 'Growing Old: Biographies of Disability and Care in Later Life', in *New Developments in the Bioarchaeology of Care*, ed. Lorna Tilley and Alecia A. Schrenk (Cham, 2017), 237–51, at 240.

³⁰ Engel, *Between the Fields*, 52–3.

³¹ See for example Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, III, 421, 563.

³² Martin Gorsky, Bernard Harris, and Andrew Hinde, 'Age, Sickness, and Longevity in the Late Nineteenth and the Early Twentieth Centuries: Evidence from the Hampshire Friendly Society', *Social Science History*, 30 (2006), 571–600; Kovalenko Ruslan *et al.*, 'Occupational Safety and Health of Factory Workers in European Countries in the Nineteenth Century: Historical and Legal Analysis', *Labor History*, 61 (2020), 388–400.

³³ For an excellent discussion of the challenges of defining generations, see Stephen Lovell (ed.), *Generations in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Basingstoke, 2007), 1–18.

³⁴ Christine D. Worobec, *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post Emancipation Period* (Princeton, 1991); Corinne Gaudin, *Ruling Peasants: Village and State in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, 2007); David Ransel (ed.), *The Family in Imperial Russia: New Lines of Historical Research* (Urbana, 1976).

³⁵ Engel, *Between the Fields*, 15–16.

³⁶ Worobec, *Peasant Russia*, 175–207; A. Balov, 'Ocherki Poshekhon'ia', *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie*, 40–1 (1899), 193–224, at 217.

³⁷ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, III, 443.

administration of the village.³⁸ These generational power structures are compelling, and they point to the visibility and power of older people in their ‘third age’; that is, older people who retained high levels of physical and mental capacity.

Moral arbiters and placeholders of the past

On religious holidays, the young stroll and the old pray.
(Stefan Fedorovich Klimentov, soldier, Yaroslavl province)³⁹

Old people were seen by their community as arbiters of religious practice and religious leaders.⁴⁰ Multiple accounts present the old as the most active members of the community in religious practice. They read and listened to religious books, aloud and for their own pleasure, in Church Slavonic and in Russian.⁴¹ They were more likely to pray, and when they prayed they tended to do so in a more committed way, prostrating their bodies to the ground.⁴² They were more likely to fast and to abstain from meat, more likely to attend church and to go on pilgrimages to holy places.⁴³ Fasting for Lent was reported as being on the wane in general by the early twentieth century, and several accounts noted that ‘only a few old people’ continue to fast.⁴⁴ The old were most likely to lead requests for special prayers, and to practise and reinforce religious practice.⁴⁵ In Il’insk village in Yaroslavl province, the custom of putting out a baked star for dinner on the eve of the resurrection of Christ was only preserved among those families with old people – the star was then eaten by the whole family.⁴⁶ This custom indicates the ways in which the old family member could not just preserve a relic of ‘old’ practice, but put it into action so that the whole family engaged with it.

Old people were represented by Tenishev’s correspondents and by the community themselves as placeholders of the past. Old people remembered a different kind of life, of serfdom and longer military service.⁴⁷ The old were often

³⁸ Engel, *Between the Fields*, 54.

³⁹ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest’iane*, II.2, 404.

⁴⁰ Greg Freeze, ‘A Pious Folk? Religious Observance in Vladimir Diocese, 1900–1914’, *Jahrbucher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 52 (2004), 323–40; Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (New York, 2004). In his excellent treatment of popular piety, Chulos does not refer to generational shifts within Orthodox religious practice; Chris J. Chulos, *Converging Worlds: Religion and Community in Peasant Russia 1861–1917* (DeKalb, 2003).

⁴¹ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest’iane*, I, 68.

⁴² *Ibid.*, VII.4, 273; III, 513 – on praying and prostrating.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, V.4, 101–2 – on church attendance and pilgrimages by the old; I, 295 – on abstaining from meat and fasting; III, 424, 271 – church attendance; II.1, 591 – on abstention from meat.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, II.1, 2, 232; II.2, 71, 314 – old observing Lent.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 443 – old leading requests for special prayers.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 248.

⁴⁷ For example, *ibid.*, V.2, 262 – on old discussing serfdom; VII.4, 258 – on old people reminiscing. On nostalgia, see Hannah Skoda, ‘Nostalgia and (Pre-)modernity’, *History and Theory*, 62 (2023), 251–71.

held up as the source and repository of past knowledge.⁴⁸ E. E. Grigor'ev, a teacher from Kaluga province, reported that the elderly regarded comets as a sign from God of forthcoming calamity: war, harvest failure, hunger, pestilence. They recall that 'There was a comet in 1812, in the Hungarian March, in the Sevastopol war and in Turkey.'⁴⁹ Rumours and knowledge of Russian history often come from the old. Alexander II, for example, was remembered as the Tsar-Liberator; 'God grant him, father, the Kingdom of Heaven: the great benefactor defended the peasants from the nobles and received a cruel death.'⁵⁰ Several accounts referred to old people as repositories of the 'old songs' and suggested that young people neither knew nor cared about old songs.⁵¹

This placeholder role combined nostalgia and knowledge of the past, manifested in storytelling and anecdote, with moral waymarking, highlighting aspects of change in everyday life. This moral role could highlight anxieties about modern life, with its technology, urban intersections and growth of literacy, secularism and individualism. It also intersected with constructions of the elderly as repositories of superstition.⁵² Some correspondents presented the old unambiguously as fixed defenders of 'old ways'.⁵³ This could be in the economy, in agriculture, in gender norms or in cultural practice. One flash-point was in elderly people's responses to technology. The assumption in these narratives is that old people were a brake on progress. Aleksandr Nikolaevich Golubtsov, a deacon from Vologda province, reported old people saying:

'Before the end of time man will be a cunning demon: in every house snakes will hiss – these are our samovars – and there will be a fiery chariot on all roads – this is a car – and truthfully, there will no horse drawn carts – so it goes; and already, the end of the century is coming.'⁵⁴

When the railway first came to one district, it attracted great attention: 'All the local residents, including the old people, ran three and a half versts to the station, in order to watch the steam engine, but within a month they began to lose interest ... now you only hear from the peasants about the machine, "there it goes, like a horse! What a stupid whistle it has!"'⁵⁵ In another account, young people called the railway 'chugunky' (cast iron). Several of the old, especially the old men, called the steam train 'ognennoi kolesnitsei' (fiery chariot).⁵⁶ In Kaluga province where the old rarely saw, or had never seen, the railway,

⁴⁸ Stephen Lovell, 'Biography, History, and Finitude: Understanding the Life Span in Early Nineteenth-Century Russia', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 82 (2004), 246–67, esp. 255.

⁴⁹ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, III, 488.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, v.4, 175.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, vii.2, 562. See also Badcock, *Time out from the Daily Grind*, 701.

⁵² S. Dixon, 'Superstition in Imperial Russia', *Past & Present*, 109 (2008), 207–28.

⁵³ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, vii.4, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, v.2, 26.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, ii.2, 321.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, ii.2, 318.

they talked doubtfully about the steam train and described it as ‘the devil’s horse’.⁵⁷ The language used here indicates religiously founded apocalyptic fears of the modernisation process.⁵⁸

The teacher E. E. Grigor’ev, writing about Kaluga province, suggested that violence towards children and women was perpetuated by the attitudes of the old, but that the younger generation disowned such attitudes.⁵⁹ In referring to one another, old spouses didn’t use their given names, but instead adopted ‘grandfather’, ‘grandmother’ or ‘my old one’ (*maia starukha/moi starik*). Younger married people mocked the old people for their ways and called one another by name in Zhizdrinsk district of Kaluga province.⁶⁰ The peasant, poet and journalist Savva Yakovlevich Derunov, from Yaroslavl province, argued that old people were challenged, and ultimately defeated, by the forces of youth and modernity. In his account, the old in the village were a flesh-and-blood embodiment of ‘old’ ways, superstition, ignorance and passivity. Derunov discussed attitudes towards literacy, knowledge, alcohol, tobacco and religion, and concluded:

The younger generation bring to to life greater enterprise, agility and activity and homes neatness and better nutrition than was the case with the old ... in all aspects of everyday life ... Old and new trends in rural life collide, but the victory is always with the new.⁶¹

This negative construction of old people as always resisting change was not universal. Multiple accounts pointed to enthusiasm among the old for schooling, and pride in those children who could read.⁶² Literacy rates among the old were much lower than for the younger generation, and those who could read were often not fluent enough to read aloud.⁶³ The old tended to prefer sacred and spiritual books, and some were hostile to secular literature. One correspondent recounted the response of an old peasant to him in relation to reading secular books:

‘*Oi, shchoi-to ty, batiushka!* [Come off it, father!] Reading devilish books to us? Lord save us and every christened person!’⁶⁴

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 518.

⁵⁸ For discussion of peasant attitudes towards disruptive modernisation and associations with apocalyptic thought, see Lynne Viola, ‘The Peasant Nightmare: Visions of Apocalypse in the Soviet Countryside’, *Journal of Modern History*, 62 (1990), 747–70. See also John R. Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Oxford, 2009), ch. 5.

⁵⁹ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest’iane*, III, 549; VII.2, 278.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 88. Alexander D. Nakhimovsky, *The Language of Russian Peasants in the Twentieth Century: A Linguistic Analysis and Oral History* (Lanham, 2020), 10–11, discusses the importance of the Tenishev collection as a resource for direct peasant speech.

⁶¹ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest’iane*, II.1, 587.

⁶² See Sarah Badcock and Felix Cowan, ‘Lower-Class Reading in Late Imperial Russia’, *The Russian Review*, 83, no. 4 (2023), 1–19.

⁶³ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest’iane*, V.4, 167.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, V.1, 195.

The old reproaching younger generations for the decline of their morality is a persistent theme in our accounts.⁶⁵ It also resonates with age-old concerns about moral decay. These notions of moral decay often tied into ideas about cultural and economic decline, and not infrequently hinged on the notion that the youth were ‘spoiled’, most often in reference to food, drink and tobacco.⁶⁶ The priest Aleksandr Rozhdestvenskii argued that old people believed that general prosperity in the community was declining, and that this could be blamed upon the ‘spoiled’ nature of the current generation. One old man is reported as saying, ‘now if there isn’t white bread on the table, then the holiday is considered poor, but in our time we were treated to some sort of chaff, and that was all right’ (*da i ladno*).⁶⁷

The drinking of tea was ubiquitous across Russia in the nineteenth century.⁶⁸ In some correspondents’ reports, ‘nobody says anything about tea – not even the old refuse it’.⁶⁹ But there are other accounts where old people regarded tea as corrupting and bad for health. One eighty-year-old man in Novgorod province believed that tooth problems were the result of pampering.

‘Earlier’, he said, ‘we never heard of any kinds of tooth illnesses; the people were stronger. And stronger from what? Less pampering. This tea, that we’ve read about, wasn’t even heard of fifty years ago. In our whole village (Korotovo, seventy people) there was only one samovar, at Ionov’s, but now every last homeless fellow sups tea, rinsing his teeth and his belly. Little boys and girls who don’t even understand how to wipe their noses are already asking for tea. And you see teeth get painful.’⁷⁰

Old people were most likely to retain hostile attitudes towards tobacco use in general, and smoking in particular.⁷¹ One correspondent noted that ‘In the old days, all peasants avoided smoking and even disdained tobacco, calling it a filthy and accursed herb. Now (old people) still disdain it ...’⁷² Old were the only ones reported as still chewing tobacco, and this habit was on the wane even among the old – smoking was becoming ubiquitous as delivery of tobacco among rural men.⁷³ One old man, when asked why he added crushed pine needles to the *makhorka* tobacco that he smoked in a pipe, answered with a grin

⁶⁵ See for example *ibid.*, vi, 244.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of enduring elite anxieties about the corrupting influences of tea, for example, see Audra Jo Yoder, ‘Tea Time in Romanov Russia: A Cultural History, 1616–1917’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016), ch. 6.

⁶⁷ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest’iane*, v.1, 66.

⁶⁸ Alison K. Smith, *Recipes for Russia: Food and Nationhood under the Tsars* (DeKalb, 2008), 95; Morinaga Takako, ‘Tea Drinking Culture in Russia’, *Journal of International Economic Studies*, 32 (2018), 57–74.

⁶⁹ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest’iane*, II.1, 490.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, viI.2, 413.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, I, 459. See also *ibid.*, vi, 157. For a discussion of attitudes towards smoking, see Tricia Starks, *Smoking under the Tsars: A History of Tobacco in Imperial Russia* (Ithaca, 2018), 162–200.

⁷² Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest’iane*, v.2, 301.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, II.2, 344 – reference to chewing tobacco only among old men; *ibid.*, III, 75.

and a cackle, 'It's not too harmful, and the smell is nicer, and you look, it's more fun.'⁷⁴

Attitudes varied of course, between individuals and between regions. We can see this in reports of old people's attitudes towards dance. In Cherepovets district of Novgorod province, the teacher Antipov suggested that the old praised skilled dancers; one old man said 'Look how the son of a bitch dances, look how he moves his feet!'⁷⁵ Aleksei Fomin noted that old people in the district were approving about 'walking songs', relatively quiet dances like quadrilles:

'If they walk quietly, do not stomp, do not kick up, then let them walk. God is with them,' the old men say. 'There is no sin there.' The Russian squatting dance, however, was considered by all older people to be a great sin: 'Dancing', they say, 'is great devilry. Those who dance, it is all one, as if spinning, will be hanged upside down in the next world, because here in this world he spins to please the devil.'⁷⁶

The construction of old people as moral arbiters is of course deeply problematic and relative. This survey of the roles taken by older people in village culture indicates the individualism of older people's contributions. They could be framed as repositories of past knowledge and as moral guardians of village communities, but there were also examples of older people embracing change.

A useful life? Work and responsibilities for the old

In rural economies, work was integral to everyday life. Those who could, worked. This need to be socially and economically productive and useful was reinforced by tax responsibilities, which were defined by the number of souls per area of land, without any exclusions for the old and others not physically able.⁷⁷ This requirement to pay tax was not rescinded 'even if they have only a crust of land, or only a market garden'.⁷⁸ While collective responsibility for taxation was abolished in most of European Russia in 1903, in practice village elders continued to bear responsibility for the allocation of taxation, and tended to follow existing practice.⁷⁹

Older people were critical workers within rural communities. Their experience in agriculture and specific industries meant that they could contribute beyond their individual strength to the success of the household and the community. For women, their status and experience within the household enabled

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, v.2, 16.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, vii.2, 533.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, ii.2, 319; see also *ibid.*, iii, 520.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, i, 220.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, i, 302.

⁷⁹ Yanni Kotsonis, *States of Obligation: Taxes and Citizenship in the Russian Empire and Early Soviet Republic* (Toronto, 2014), ch. 9, provides a thorough analysis of this problem. See also Gaudin, *Ruling Peasants*, 39.

them to take on running households even as they disavowed the most physically demanding work. The teacher Liubov Il'inichna Solov'eva noted that in Oboiansk district, Kursk province, while women usually withdrew from fieldwork from the age of about fifty, they then took on critical and leading roles in the household, running the house, heating the stove, looking after the children and so on.⁸⁰ There were skills that only the old exercised – in one village, people were no longer wearing woven shoes (*lapti*), and only the old wove them anymore.⁸¹ Aleksandr Rozhdestvenskii noted that in Rozhdestvensk district, Vologda province, older women spun *krasna*, a long canvas cloth, which required high levels of skill and dexterity, and which skilled women completed into old age.⁸² Beekeeping was mentioned as an occupation practised exclusively by old people.⁸³ In one village, an old man who wasn't fit for fieldwork exercised his skill as a tar maker when it was required.⁸⁴ Washing the dead was a task reserved exclusively for old people, with men washing men's corpses, and women washing women's corpses. They were paid for these services, and only orderly, decent folk were chosen for the task.⁸⁵

Another core area of respect and responsibility for old people in village life was as healers, traditional midwives and practitioners of magic. Traditional midwives (*povitukhi*) were almost invariably older peasant women.⁸⁶ Their role was to care for the mother in labour and to provide more generic support for the family unit after the birth, cooking, cleaning, fetching water and fuel. Traditional healers, a category that encompassed 'wise people' (*znakhar/znarkha*), midwives, bloodletters and bonesetters, were usually older people, and a significant number were women. They commanded respect 'because of their age and experience' and were consulted on a bewildering array of household and community issues, from personal health to fortune telling, from finding things that were lost to doctoring cows.⁸⁷ Witchcraft and sorcery were also skill sets usually ascribed to older people – elderly and widowed women were prominent in cases of witchcraft. One Tula folktale recalled that a witch was 'a woman as old as old can be'.⁸⁸ These roles as healers and arbiters of the spiritual world were a distinctive and important contribution to community life

⁸⁰ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, vi, 30. Another rich account of the importance of the old woman's role in the home in *ibid.*, i, 448.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, v.1, 65.

⁸² *Ibid.*, vi, 30.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, i, 456.; beekeeping carried out by middle-aged and old in *ibid.*, iii, 73; *ibid.*, v.3, 325.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, v.3, 582.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, i, 441; ii.1, 606; v.1, 113. On death practices in the village, see Chulos, *Converging Worlds*, 38–40.

⁸⁶ Samuel C. Ramer, 'Childbirth and Culture: Midwifery in the Nineteenth Century Russian Countryside', in *The Family in Imperial Russia: New Lines of Historical Research*, ed. David L. Ransel (Chicago, 1976), 218–35, esp. 229.

⁸⁷ Samuel C. Ramer, 'Traditional Healers and Peasant Culture in Russia, 1861–1917', in *Peasant Economy, Culture and Politics of European Russia 1860–1921*, ed. E. Kingston-Mann, T. Mixer and Jeffrey Burds (Princeton, 1991), 207–32, esp. 210, 222–3.

⁸⁸ Christine D. Worobec, 'Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices in Prerevolutionary Russian and Ukrainian Villages', *The Russian Review*, 54 (1995), 165–87, esp. 168, 173, 177.

and demonstrate that old people had core spheres of influence in the community's spiritual, economic and collective lives.

For older people whose physical or mental strength was failing, work entailed taking on roles that required lower levels of strength, skill and dexterity. Market gardening, that is, production for the household on home plots, and maybe for sale locally, was work for 'the weak of strength'; that is, the old and children.⁸⁹ When the 'able' working hands were all mobilised at harvest time, the elderly 'rushed around the garden' with the children, picking and preparing berries.⁹⁰ A correspondent from Kostroma province, K. E. Rashchin, reported that people who were not fit for physical labour could be hired as herdsmen (*pastukhi*), including able old people, teenagers and sometimes 'idiots' (*durachki*) of both sexes. The very word *pastukh* could be used as an insult.⁹¹

The roles that the old might take on varied according to the shape of the local economy. In Griazovetsk district, Vologda province, the old practised spinning in summer and winter.⁹² In Lapshante, a village in Kostroma province, a few old men did nothing but fish all year round.⁹³ In Novoladozhsk district of St Petersburg province, old women were responsible for weaving fishing nets from best linen.⁹⁴ In Poshekon'e district of Yaroslavl province, where there was a bark industry, the old, along with other 'weak' family members (children and women), were sent out to strip bark from willow bushes and shrubs. These materials were supplied to local factories.⁹⁵ For those areas with high levels of seasonal and urban out-migration, old people were often 'left behind' in the village, and were responsible both for fieldwork and for the maintenance of the household.⁹⁶ The very old, along with young children, were the only community members not to go out on seasonal work at Lent in the community of Soligalichsk district, Kostroma province.⁹⁷ These areas with high out-migration patterns were full of old people who had spent their working lives in the city. These folk were described as 'unwitting villagers'.⁹⁸

Many of Tenishev's correspondents remarked on the relationship between productive work and access to food. An anecdote from Vasillii Antipovich Antipov, a teacher from Novgorod province, offers a useful illustration:

In Korotov village there's an eighty-year-old man, Grigory. He works on a par at every task with his son and grandson: he ploughs, and mows, and hammers in the forge. Once the priest met Gregory mowing in the field,

⁸⁹ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, II.1, 2, 305.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, VII.1, 430.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, I, 383.

⁹² *Ibid.*, V.2, 14.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, I, 69; see also *ibid.*, V.3, 325.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, 344.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, II.1, 2, 177.

⁹⁶ Engel, *Between the Fields*.

⁹⁷ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, I, 307; see also *ibid.*, III, 476 and II.2, 250.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, VI, 70.

and said to him: 'You've done your time, Gregory, it's time to give it up.' Grigory answered, 'well father, as I keep up with scything in the row, so I do not lag behind at the table.'⁹⁹

Grigory's case hinted that if he wanted to eat well, he needed to work well. Does a human still have value if they can no longer contribute economically to the household or the community? This difficult question did not have straightforward answers in the late Imperial Russian context. The distribution and division of food was one of the most often reported spaces of intergenerational tension within households and offers insight into the sharp end of the relationships between life, worth and living. There was a consensus in the Tenishev reports that old people should eat less than working family members.¹⁰⁰ Household tensions were most heightened in times of dearth, and food could provoke heated quarrels.¹⁰¹ These quarrels were often spaces in which old people were explicitly targeted. Aleksei Grigorevich Vasil'ev reported from Novgorod province that it was rare for a mealtime to pass without bickering, and that the old were often targeted by their children for eating too much or too quickly. In one family, the son berated his old parents every mealtime: 'You've scooped all the beef out of the soup! Now I'm eating empty soup! You eat, you don't work, and you're the first to eat!'¹⁰²

This overview of work patterns for older people confirms their economic and cultural significance within village life. It also emphasises that worth and value within the family and the community was to some extent conditional on capacity to contribute to economic life.

The fourth age: waiting to die?

At the Dvuchasovs' country house, their old Nyanya was readying herself for death; she had been doing this for ten years ... in a corner behind a dresser, she would sit or lie on her trunk and carry on with her dying till spring.

Come spring, she'd pick a dry, sunny day, stretch a rope between a pair of trees in the birch grove, and air her burial clothes: a long-yellowed linen shirt, a pair of embroidered slippers, a pale blue belt – embroidered with a prayer for the repose of the dead – and a small cypress wood cross.¹⁰³

Nyanya's theatrical preparations reflected a broader peasant tradition of old age as a period where one awaits death.¹⁰⁴ The care of old people at the end of their lives allows us to explore and to test the final frontiers of attitudes towards older people. People ailed and died primarily in village domestic

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, vii.2, 283.

¹⁰⁰ For example, *ibid.*, ii.2, 129–30; ii.1, 600; ii.2, 371.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, iii, 323; vii.4, 20.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, vii.2, 562.

¹⁰³ 'Soul in Bond', in Teffi, *Other Worlds: Peasants, Pilgrims, Spirits, Saints*, ed. Robert Chandler, trans. Elizabeth Chandler, Sara Jolly and Nicolas Slater (2021), 13.

¹⁰⁴ Panchenko, 'Obraz starosti'.

spaces, cared for by their relatives and neighbours. Contemporary elites looked at inadequate care for old people as one of the indicators of modern decay, along with the development of an urban working class, the evolution of mass literacy, and autonomous cultural practices.¹⁰⁵ Russia's elite society regarded the stability of the family as critical to the stability of the state. Care for the frail elderly was one of the litmus tests of society's functionality and viability.¹⁰⁶ This final section starts by exploring the ways in which older people sought to plan and prepare for their final years, through manipulation of their wills and familial relations. We then go on to look at the mechanisms in place to provide care and support for the frail elderly at community level. The final part reflects on the lived experience of frail elderly people within their family homes. Frailty and infirmity are used in contemporary medical discourse to refer to the physical decline of advanced old age. The term frailty captures the 'residuum and repository of feared old age', and it is this aspect of life which is the focus of this final section.¹⁰⁷

Property rights and adoption

The inheritance and distribution of property was a tangible means for old people to negotiate their status and care within the family or community. Expectations that they would be cared for in extreme old age and buried respectfully were tied into their decisions and capacity to disburse property. Tensions within households are most often visible to us as historians when they were brought to the district (*volost*) court for legal resolution.¹⁰⁸ This happened most often around questions of the family property's separation and redistribution (*razdel*).¹⁰⁹ The legal status of inheritance and family property disputes was extremely complex. District courts had jurisdiction in civil disputes between all non-privileged country dwellers about any property acquired under emancipation, or any other property up to the value of 500 roubles. At district level, judges were expected to consider local customs or customary law, which was a reference to patterns of behaviour regarded as 'normal' or 'right' or 'obligatory' in the familiar situations of daily life. They were to evaluate these local customs alongside written legal code, usual referring to the civil laws (*zakony grazhdanskie*) in part 1, volume 1 of the Full Digest of Laws (*svod zakonov*) that dated back to 1832.¹¹⁰ What local custom might constitute was of course subject to rigorous contention. The testimony of old

¹⁰⁵ William G. Wagner, 'Family Law, the Rule of Law, and Liberalism in Late Imperial Russia', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 43 (1995), 519–35, esp. 533–4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 533–4.

¹⁰⁷ Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs, 'Frailty, Disability and Old Age: A Re-appraisal', *Health*, 15 (2011), 475–90, at 484.

¹⁰⁸ The landmark work on this topic was Jane Burbank, *Russian Peasants Go to Court: Legal Culture in the Countryside, 1905–1917* (Bloomington, 2004).

¹⁰⁹ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, v.3, 328. For scholarship on *razdel*, see Cathy A. Frierson, 'Razdel: The Peasant Family Divided', *The Russian Review*, 46 (1987), 35–51.

¹¹⁰ Gareth Popkins, 'Code versus Custom? Norms and Tactics in Peasant Volost Court Appeals, 1889–1917', *The Russian Review*, 59 (2000), 408–24, esp. 409–11.

people was permissible as proof of what local custom constituted, an example of respect for the elderly as arbiters of the past.¹¹¹

Property rights and authority are usually presented as tied explicitly to seniority and to gender hierarchies – the older male has authority and legal possession of properties. In practice, this was not always the case. Older people could be marginalised or even entirely disempowered if their capacity to work, or their mental faculties, deteriorated. The old could resort to the district court if they were being neglected in the household, or even starved, though one correspondent noted that they were usually very reluctant to do so, because of the ire this could provoke within the household.¹¹² We can see some of the complexities of this with the Petrov family in Yaroslavl province. Fedot Petrov, the patriarch, was sixty years old but no longer able to work. His married son Pavel was forty years old and had been working for the household for twenty years. Fedot applied to divide the property, intending to give significant parts of it to his married daughters. Pavel appealed against this in the district court, and the court found in his favour – the father, Fedot, could not divide the property which Pavel lived and worked in, but the son, Pavel, had to feed and care for Fedot till his death. The correspondent reports that this outcome was agreeable to both parties, and that they went on to live ‘in love and agreement’.¹¹³

Several accounts reinforced the notion that the elder man retained power and control over household division and inheritance. Family property’s separation and redistribution (*razdel*) was usually hindered by the elder, whose authority was great in most families, and who often refused *razdel* while they lived; ‘after I die you can do what you like, but while I’m alive, don’t you dare’.¹¹⁴ Nikolai Kolosov, a teacher from Kostroma province, noted that no matter how old and decrepit the father was, he held full authority over the property as long as he was of sound mind, and the property could not be divided without his consent.¹¹⁵ Sergei Aleksandrovich Dilaktorskii, a nobleman and veterinary surgeon from Vologda province, noted that if the property was divided before the elders’ deaths, but they were not to live with their children, then formal provision was made that the children were to provide specific foodstuffs, firewood and money to the old parents.¹¹⁶ The prevailing opinion in one village was that while grandfather was alive, he was master of the house, even if the son had in practice been running the household for years. Despite this, the correspondent went on to note that in practice there might be adjustments to distribution of property without grandfather’s permission. In Kalyagin village, a peasant cut off one of his sons, who had married against his will, even though the grandfather did not approve:

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 419.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, v.4, 180.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, II.1, 344.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II.1, 345–7.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 332.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, v.2, 604.

'Of course, according to the rule, it would be impossible to go against the old man,' the father said about this incident, 'because he will not go from the stove to the community gathering (*skhod*) in his old age, well, and you do as you yourself want.'¹¹⁷

The use of wills for the control of inheritance became increasingly normalised by the turn of the twentieth century. Peasants were permitted by law to draw up testaments using simplified procedures, though local customs defined adjudication of these processes.¹¹⁸ Nikolai Falalevich Preobrazhenskii noted that in Vologda province the old often drew up written wills, primarily to ensure that the child or relative who cared for them in their old age be proportionately rewarded: 'After all, he fed and watered me till I died,' thinks the old person, 'and he will bury and remember me.'¹¹⁹ In the case of a wealthy old couple from Novgorod province, the elder son separated from the household, taking a third of the property, and leaving the old couple to live with the younger son in the larger property. The younger son neglected his parents, and this caught the attention of the elder son and his wife. They surreptitiously moved the parents to live with them, and the old man drew up a new will whereby the elder son inherited a greater share on the old man's death.¹²⁰

Childless older people deployed a range of strategies to secure support for their fourth age. Property and other forms of wealth could be used by old people as leverage to secure care. If an old couple had no son, then they might 'adopt' their son-in-law or brother-in-law, and allow him to inherit their property, with the condition that they would be cared for until their death and buried 'honestly' in accordance with Christian rites.¹²¹ If they had no daughter, then they might adopt an unrelated person to take on this role. This form of old person 'adoption', referred to in Chupovets district of Novgorod province as 'feeding', was approved by the commune (*obshchina*), and was overseen by the district board.¹²² The adoption was not formally registered, but the adopted son (*primak*) was regarded as heir. Another version of this was that an old person would be taken into another family, either a relative or someone unrelated. The old person would be cared for until death, and their immovable property would be inherited by the carers.¹²³ The practice of 'adoption' is well known and documented, but accounts usually stress the practice's function in avoiding dispersal of family property. By thinking about the process from the perspective of vulnerable older people, we can see less the welfare role of the peasant household, and more the ways in which elderly people mobilised to try

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II.2, 319.

¹¹⁸ Gareth Popkins, 'Russian Peasant Wills in the Decisions of the Ruling Senate, 1861–1906', *Journal of Legal History*, 20, no. 2 (1999), 1–23, esp. 2, 13, 18.

¹¹⁹ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, v.2, 707.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, VII.2, 302.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, v.2, 439.

¹²² *Ibid.*, III, 384–5. See also *ibid.* VII.3, 96.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, VII.3, 249.

to protect themselves in advanced old age.¹²⁴ We can also see that these arrangements, which were often sanctioned by the community, functioned as mechanisms to reduce the perceived burden of caring for the elderly. The community's expectation was that an adopted son would need to care for the parents in old age.¹²⁵ One case explicitly suggested that a son who agreed to take in or support elderly parents had the right to a greater share of their property.¹²⁶ An 1885 resolution in Beloomut stipulated that a woman without other forms of support could only sell her property on the condition that the buyer committed to pall any taxes and dues that she owed, and to support the woman in her old age.¹²⁷

One source suggested that disputes within families were usually handled without recourse to external authorities, or that in worst-case scenario, the village assembly or the village court of elders would intercede.¹²⁸ Several accounts, however, refer to disputes over inheritance and care for elderly relatives turning up regularly both in the *volost* courts and in the higher courts of appeal (from 1891). In Ryazan region in 1910, an absentee peasant-worker appealed the *volost* court's approval of his ailing mother's right to one-third of the deceased father's property. The communal assembly was engaged on behalf of the old woman and sent a representative to speak on her behalf. The appeal court ruled against her because she was 'incapable of running the household, and could not therefore request a division'.¹²⁹

Care in the community

Most elderly people lived out their days in their homes and were to some extent cared for by family and community. The prevalence of kinship relationships as the main source of caregiving in later life is enduring across time and place.¹³⁰ In late Imperial Russia, the village commune was responsible for providing aid and support to the aged, decrepit and disabled. In practice, this responsibility was unevenly and patchily met, and relied primarily on individual community members' acts of charity.¹³¹ Formalised healthcare had been virtually non-existent in Russian villages before the establishment of *zemstvo*, a form of representative local government, in 1864. The *zemstvo* made healthcare their biggest area of expenditure, and increased access to doctors and medical assistants (*feld'shers*) exponentially by the turn of the century. Despite this, medical

¹²⁴ Worobec's excellent treatment of the process articulates the welfare role but does not draw out older people's agency and need to self-protect so much. Worobec, *Peasant Russia*, 57–62.

¹²⁵ Popkins, 'Code versus Custom', 414–15.

¹²⁶ Gaudin, *Ruling Peasants*, 123.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹²⁸ Cathy A. Frierson, "'I must always answer to the law ...' Rules and Responses in the Reformed Volost' Court', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 75 (1997), 308–34, esp. 329–30.

¹²⁹ Gaudin, *Ruling Peasants*, 127.

¹³⁰ Gowland, 'Growing Old', 238.

¹³¹ Mironov, 'The Russian Peasant Commune', 454; Adele Lindenmeyr, *Poverty Is Not a Vice: Charity, Society and the State in Late Imperial Russia* (Princeton, 1996), 51.

expertise and support in most rural areas was rudimentary or entirely lacking.¹³² Hospices did not exist in this context. Hospitals were few and far between and were regarded by older people and the community with fear and suspicion.¹³³ One correspondent reported that hospitals were seen by villagers as places to die.¹³⁴ The medicalisation of ageing that was reaching the Russian Empire by the early twentieth century had not reached rural lower-class spaces.¹³⁵

It was a core expectation in rural communities that children should feed and care for their parents in old age. Household units (*dvor*) were expected to care for their members when they were no longer able to work.¹³⁶ The responsibility to care for one's parents was deeply held in the community and applied to families where children had moved out and set up their own households, as well as where the family all lived together.¹³⁷ As one correspondent noted, 'Without the blessing of father and mother, there will be no luck or happiness in anything.'¹³⁸ This emphasis on parental care left childless old people at a particular disadvantage.¹³⁹ Russia at the turn of the century did not have any public welfare organisation, and had no pension provision for older people. Pensions for poor elderly people were established in multiple other states in the early twentieth century: Germany in 1889, Denmark in 1891, New Zealand in 1898, Australia and Britain in 1908.¹⁴⁰ Welfare provisions in Russia, such as they were, stemmed primarily from family and community interventions. While urban spaces saw the development of very limited provision of welfare in the form of almshouses, there was no such provision for most rural spaces.¹⁴¹ This differed from some other parts of Europe, where state-sponsored welfare organisations offered some degree of safety-net welfare for impoverished old people.¹⁴²

Filial duty enabled the community to function effectively, and where children failed to care for their elderly parents, or if the elderly had no one to care for them, the onus for care moved towards the community at large.

¹³² Steven Nafziger, 'Did Ivan's Vote Matter? The Political Economy of Local Democracy in Tsarist Russia', *European Review of Economic History*, 15 (2011), 393–441, esp. 397–400. Samuel C. Ramer, 'The Zemstvo and Public Health' in *The Zemstvo in Russia: An Experiment in Local Self-Government*, ed. Terence Emmons and Wayne S. Vucinich (Cambridge, 1982), 279–314; see esp. table 8.1, showing coverage of zemstvo doctors and medical assistants.

¹³³ F. A. Brokgauz and E. A. Efron, *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar Brokgauza i Efrona*, vol. iv (St Petersburg, 1891), 325–7. Lindenmeyr, 'Work, Charity, and the Elderly', 237ff., discusses almshouses, and notes peasant resistance to institutionalised support.

¹³⁴ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, iv, 178, 183.

¹³⁵ Lovell, 'Finitude at the Fin de Siècle', 298.

¹³⁶ Engel, *Between the Fields*, 42.

¹³⁷ Baranov *et al.* (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, iv, 124.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, iv, 116.

¹³⁹ For a broader framing of the problem of old age for childless people, see Christian Deindl and Martina Brandt, 'Support Networks of Childless Older People: Informal and Formal Support in Europe', *Ageing & Society*, 37 (2017), 1543–67.

¹⁴⁰ Thane, 'Old Age in European Cultures', 390–2.

¹⁴¹ Lindenmeyr, *Poverty Is Not a Vice*.

¹⁴² On the English case, see Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 192–3.

Care for the vulnerable was part of the rural community's remit, but these obligations should not be romanticised. A zemstvo survey of Moscow province in 1911 found that only 22 per cent of the 137 communes surveyed provided named support to the elderly and infirm. This did not necessarily indicate dedicated support for vulnerable elderly people. Of these, half of the communes had passed a resolution that rotated the obligation to feed and care for the vulnerable elderly around the community.¹⁴³ There were sometimes conflicts between authorities and the community over the provision of communal welfare.¹⁴⁴ In practice, community care for frail elderly was patchy, and might constitute no more than the provision of alms to beggars.

The community could intervene on multiple levels in cases where children failed to care for their old parents. The peasant Stepan Fedotovitch Stavoverov noted that in some cases in Vologda province, daughters-in-law mistreated their old parents-in-law, and that in these cases, fellow villagers were condemnatory but did not intervene, 'except for close relatives of the sick and decrepit, who could take them for a while, under the guise of an invitation to visit, and give them proper rest and care for a while'.¹⁴⁵ In another case, a wealthier peasant divided his property, but was neglected and treated disrespectfully by his younger son, whom he and his wife had moved in with. The old man complained with tears in his eyes to the correspondent, Aleksandr Grigorevich Vasil'ev, that he was being oppressed, but that nothing could be done, since the division was made legally and formalised. 'I thought they would understand my kindness, take care of me and the old woman in our old age, but this is what happened!'¹⁴⁶

There were cases where children wilfully neglected their old parents. In Zimnichka village, Kaluga province, the priest's daughter V. E. Zorina recalled the tale of Agaf'ia Zhukova, who told her that neither her husband, Pavel Zhukov, a landless peasant from Khimok village, nor his brother, Akim Zhukov, would care for their own father, who was paralysed. The father took his case to the district court, and the court instructed the brothers to share responsibility for their father. The old man rotated a week at a time between the two households. Agaf'ia found out that Akim was not giving his father enough to eat and was not keeping him clean, so she secretly visited him to bring extra food and to change his linen.¹⁴⁷ This case is revealing in multiple respects: the court intervened on behalf of the neglected father, and the daughter-in-law displayed care and compassion in attending to the father-in-law's needs even against the wishes of her husband.

E. N. Kuznetsov, a student from Kostroma province, noted that the village *skhod* could intervene if it was felt that a child was not caring for his father, either 'not feeding him, or pulling his beard.' If the *skhod*'s intervention was not effective, then the district court sentenced the son to fifteen lashes with

¹⁴³ Gaudin, *Ruling Peasants*, 141.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁴⁵ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, v.2, 273.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, vii.2, 546.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, iii, 55.

the birch and ordered that he must feed his father until the father died.¹⁴⁸ Sergei Vladimirovich Korvin-Krukovskii, from Nizhegorod province, reported cases where parents appealed to the local district court with complaints about neglect from their children. In these cases, the district court could assign a cash maintenance sum, which it determined based on the relative wealth of the children.¹⁴⁹

Support in old age presented specific challenges for those old people without children.¹⁵⁰ In Shava village, Makar'evsk district, Nizhnii Novgorod province, they were referred to as 'orphans', and they 'live somewhere at the end of the village in uncomfortable places'.¹⁵¹ In Ulomsk region of Cherepovetsk district, Vologda province, landless old men and women were given a small garden plot with which to sustain themselves.¹⁵² The nobleman and historian Aleksandr Evgrafovich Mertsalov reported that in Kadnikovsk district of Vologda province, old people without relatives were rootless and uncared for.¹⁵³ The teacher Aleksandr Grigorevich Vasil'ev suggested that in Cherepovets district of Novgorod province, the whole community cared for those sick and old people who had no family of their own, taking turns in lighting the stove, bringing food and cleaning them up. If they didn't have their own hut, unsupported old people were allocated housing in a church cell and taken care of there.¹⁵⁴ His was the only account to articulate support for old people so confidently.

The account of Mikhei Fedorovich Kholin, from Nizhnii Novgorod province, reinforced the idea that the community provided structured support to childless old people. Kholin noted that almost everywhere in the local villages one could find some rootless and landless old men and women who live 'by the mercy of Christ', either supported by well-off households or who lived in 'cells' provided by the church. These church-supported paupers didn't beg round the village, but received alms, usually money, from worshippers in the church who could leave donations on a small shelf arranged on the jamb of the window.¹⁵⁵ Finally, the childless old person could sell their land, and use the proceeds to support themselves.¹⁵⁶

The complete absence of state support and intervention for old people in rural spaces ensured that the spectacle of old people begging around the houses within their own community, or walking between villages to receive support, was entrenched in late Imperial rural society. Beggars were rarely refused in rural spaces, which had a strongly developed culture of providing crusts for the

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, i, 76.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, iv, 116. See also *ibid.*, iv, 118.

¹⁵⁰ See Deindl and Brandt, 'Support Networks of Childless Older People'; Kersti Lust, 'Aging without Children in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Rural Estonia', *Journal of Family History*, 47 (2022), 172–92.

¹⁵¹ Baranov et al. (eds.), *Russkie krest'iane*, iv, 337.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, vii.2, 30.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, v.2, 712.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.2, 543.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, iv, 170.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, iii, 365.

needy, even from households that were themselves poor.¹⁵⁷ Various accounts reported that the elderly made up a significant number of village beggars, and that they came either on their own behalf, or they were sent out to beg by their impoverished families. Korvin-Krukovskii reported that most beggars were old people without property or relatives to support them, and who were totally incapable of work as a result of decrepitude or illness, and lived exclusively on alms.¹⁵⁸ This strategic use of the elderly by needy families indicates that the old were seen by the community as particularly deserving of charity.

Care in the home

One universal in remarks was that the sick and decrepit were housebound, and this meant that in periods of busy fieldwork, but especially in the summer, the sick were left at home. Care was generally better for the housebound sick in the winter, with neighbours ‘considering it their duty’ to pop round.¹⁵⁹ Some correspondents suggested that neighbours and other old people took care of the sick and the young children in homes where the other folk were out in the fields, and that in general ‘old folks and especially children, are not left to starve’. In this account, visiting the sick was considered ‘a good thing’, and neighbours popped by with food and drinks for the invalid.¹⁶⁰ Other accounts, however, describe terrible neglect for the decrepit, and assert that they were left with no support, and often died alone.

For the sick here, in general, care is very bad, and is sometimes altogether out of sight; in the summertime, for example, in work time, a ladle of water is left near the patient and they are left alone for the whole day ... decrepit old people are left especially often ... Here in the village, a decrepit old woman, unable to move, lay alone in the hut for days, in the end, she died alone; when the family returned from work, they found her already dead.¹⁶¹

We can observe a range of attitudes towards sick and dying old people, with a spectrum of care from unfettered kindness and solicitude all the way through to life-shortening abuse.¹⁶² The rationale for quality of care varied from philosophical (‘they’ve had their time’) to practical (‘no time when the fieldwork is busy’) to economic (no time or resources to support non-productive family member). The balance of accounts veers towards philosophically and practically based neglect of sick old people. The seminary student Vasiliĭ Arkad’evich Shesterikov argued that the miserable condition in which the decrepit old lived in Vologda

¹⁵⁷ Lindenmeyr, ‘Work, Charity, and the Elderly’, 242–3.

¹⁵⁸ Baranov, *Russkie krest’iane*, iv, 169. See also *ibid.*, v.3, 123; vii.3, 360, 363, 365; vi, 378; vii.1, 297; vii.2, 404.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, vii.4, 285.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, ii.1, 604. On old as carers, see also *ibid.*, iv, 183.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, ii.2, 389. See also *ibid.*, v.2, 97, 381–2.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, ii.1, 604; for positive account of cared-for old people, *ibid.*, vii.2, 424.

province meant that their desire for death and sense of hopelessness was 'natural'. 'Unfit for work, old and sick, they sincerely ask God for death.'¹⁶³

The nobleman Sergei Vladimirovich Korvin-Krukovskii presented a more nuanced view, recounting that in Nizhnii Novgorod province, within the family setting, reproaches to old people and poor quality of care came about when the family experienced extreme need and poverty, either because of failed harvests or because of accident. Such desperate situations meant that those not capable of work because of decrepitude faced reproaches about their long lives, and articulation of the desire that they would die. He stressed, however, that these views never developed into actions that might shorten the old person's life as this 'would be, in the opinion of a peasant, a grave sin and a grave crime tantamount to murder'.¹⁶⁴

Other accounts suggested that those old people who were no longer fit to work were treated in ways that necessarily shortened their lives through moral suffering and neglect. The ethnographer Balov suggested that in some households other family members, including children, spoke about the old person in their earshot, though not to their faces, in extremely harsh and derogatory terms, 'If only God would come for him, then our hands would be untied,' and so on. The correspondent went on to suggest that in some households the harsh treatment of the old went beyond cruel words, and into active neglect.¹⁶⁵ These grim depictions of life for the old are supported in multiple other accounts. One telling insight is the account of the topics of conversation among old people when they met for a chat. As well as the state of their health, they discussed the amount of work that they were expected to do in the household, and whether they did this of their own volition or under duress, and they talked about whether they were treated with respect by the other householders, and if they were treated as a burden.¹⁶⁶

Many correspondents told tales of misery and humiliation for the very old. An old woman in Gridino village, Novgorod province, had two sons. She was sent to live with one of them when the property was divided. She was treated cruelly by her son and his wife, and left lying on the stove for days, sometimes without food. The other son refused to intervene, claiming it was not his responsibility. Neighbours dropped food in for the old woman, and the son was reproached by everyone in the village for his actions, but there were no further interventions.¹⁶⁷ Multiple correspondents offered accounts of households berating the sick elderly for continuing to live.¹⁶⁸ Some correspondents suggested that care for sick elderly people was rude and poor, but that this was because of a lack of time and resources, not a lack of sentimental care.¹⁶⁹ One recounted the attitudes of a peasant woman he knew, Eugenia, who complained bitterly about her ailing mother-in-law, and the demands placed on her by the sick woman; 'she tied me hand and foot'. When the old woman

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, v.1, 605.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, iv, 215.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, ii.2, 102.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, vii.1, 85.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.1, 275. See also *ibid.*, v.3, 508; ii.2, 389; iii, 289.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, iv, 194; vii.2, 283, 424; vii.3, 375.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, vii.2, 283.

died, though, Eugenia expressed remorse for her own harsh words and said 'I feel sorry for the old woman: we lived together for thirty years.'¹⁷⁰

These accounts offer us some snapshots of life behind closed doors for the frail elderly, and they indicate that many frail elderly people lived out their fourth age in environments where love and nurture were not very evident.

Conclusions

This article has sought to explore the experience of elderly people in Russian villages at the turn of the twentieth century. Wherever possible, the perspective of the elderly people themselves has been privileged. The ethnographic sources that this study draws from offer some insights into these experiences. They also, however, reinforce the fundamental challenge of accessing and respecting the perspectives of older people themselves. Most of what we know and hear of older people is reported about them, not by them. This article has tried to tackle this challenge head-on by trying to use older people's own accounts and stories wherever possible. The picture that emerges from this study both reinforces the importance and value of older people to community and family life, while simultaneously highlighting the poor treatment and sorry prospects for the 'oldest old', as frailty and ill health reduce or remove individuals' working capacity.

The first section asks when old age begins. It acknowledges the primacy of functional age over chronological age – that is, that perceptions of a person's age were connected most closely with their capacity to work, and not their birth year. The second section reinforces the importance of 'third age' active older people in family and community life. Older people played important cultural, social and economic roles, as storytellers and repositories of the past, and as moral arbiters. Older people were the most active and consistent in their practice of Russian Orthodox faith. Their working hands were necessary and valued parts of village life, whether they were deployed in roles that only they had the skills to perform, or in the jobs for the weak that they fulfilled alongside children. The third section explores the area of old age that has been most neglected in the scholarship so far, the so-called 'fourth age', that is, the period of old age characterised as decline towards the 'terminal phase' of life. By considering the use of wills, and of formal and informal adoption of heirs who would be required to take on caring obligations, we can see the ways in which older people exercised agency in planning their own futures. The picture of community care is mixed. There are some examples of specific welfare measures taken by communities to care for frail old people. The ubiquity of old people begging in many accounts indicates that care in the community was patchy and partial at best and relied heavily on individual charity and individual requests for assistance. The final part, looking at the quality of care offered to frail elderly people in their homes, indicates that end-of-life experiences were often lonely and uncomfortable. There were a suite of explanations offered for this end-of-days care. While individual circumstances

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, iii, 526.

differed, the overarching sense was of a philosophical lack of solicitude towards the frail elderly.

It is undoubtedly the case that old women, and especially widows, were in a more precarious position within the community than old men. This article has not however explored gendered differences in old age, which reflects a lack of gendered difference in the ways in which the sources discussed older people. This absence of gender differentiation for the frail elderly reinforced a sense that frail elderly people were desexed and to some extent denied individuality and agency. This exploration of the experience of old age suggests that we need to adjust and realign our understandings of seniority and power in late Imperial Russian villages. For those old people who became incapable of work, their status and value within the community and within the family collapsed. While elder men had power over their families and access to formal village power structures, this study has shown that their authority and power was eroded by frailty and old age. Hierarchies of ableness, or capacity to work, superseded generational hierarchies.

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