



Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History

Priscilla Roosevelt

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From the reign of Peter the Great, Russia's country estates were oases of barbarian splendour and personal freedom in a vast, sparsely settled and authoritarian land. This work explores the vanished world of the Russian country estate. It examines the aristocratic dwellings, discussing their origins, their design and decoration, the social, family, and cultural life within their walls, and their physical demise after the 1917 revolution. In these enclaves, newly acquired European habits competed with age-old Russian tradition. The nobility owned legions of serfs from brickmakers and gardeners to gilders and portrait painters whose labour made possible a unique way of life. On some estates, serf theatres and harems reflected the owner's unrestrained personal fantasy; on others, relations between lord and serf echoed the patriarchal values of the Russian elite. Throughout the empire, the sights, sounds and realities of country life inspired both plans for political and social reform and much of Russia's great art, literature and music. The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 altered the dynamics of this life, but the cultural significance of the estate remained strong to the end of the old regime. The Bolshevik revolution destroyed both the world of the estate and much of the evidence about it. To recreate this lost world the author draws on sources including the physical remains of once grand manor houses (many photographed for this book), the diaries and memoirs that chronicle a way of life that was to perish, and the Russian art and literature that estate life produced and in which it was portrayed. Juxtaposing images from art and from the novels of such literary giants as Turgenev and Tolstoy with the real milieu that inspired them, this text is a portrait of Russian country life.

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