Vlada Traven, La datcha en Russie de 1917 à nos jours

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REFERENCES

Vlada TRAVEN, **La datcha en Russie de 1917 à nos jours**. Paris : Éditions du Sextant, 2005, 232 p.

- 1 This book presents a clear and well-informed account of dacha settlement around Moscow in the Soviet era. Vlada Traven contends that the history of suburban and exurban development offers a rewarding perspective on the Soviet experience. She starts with the striking idea that the “normal” process of suburbanization around Russia’s major cities was blocked by the Revolution. In the early twentieth century, dacha settlements were rapidly being converted into dwellings for year-round occupancy. In the Soviet period, however, the divide between urban and out-of-town living was firmly re-established.
- 2 This did not occur without much hesitation and confusion. Traven notes the chaotic state of former dacha settlements in the civil war period and the early 1920s: the Soviet regime was still in no condition to look after the exurban housing stock. She traces the various measures taken to begin to improve the situation: demunicipalization, the creation of a dacha co-operative movement in the late 1920s, and then the move to the *proizvodstvennyi printsip* whereby dacha construction took place under the auspices of the enterprise or some other workplace. In the Stalin era, land and resources were handed out liberally to categories of the population that had earned the state’s gratitude. The politics of dacha allocation thus played a significant part in the consolidation of a new elite of physicists, writers, apparatchiks and generals.
- 3 When Traven reaches the post-Stalin era, her attention switches largely to the “poor man’s dacha” of the garden settlement. She shows that garden plots, originally conceived as an ad hoc measure to meet the postwar subsistence crisis, gradually became

more “dacha-like” as sheds and temporary structures mutated into small exurban dwellings.

- 4 The backbone of Traven’s account is provided by a study of state legislation and administrative directives. Using both published and unpublished sources (some of them hitherto unknown to scholarship), she convincingly shows the ambiguities of government policy in this area and precisely locates the sources of tension and disagreement within the political establishment.
- 5 As a trained architect, Traven has many interesting things to say about the design both of individual dachas and of whole settlements. For example, she describes the paradoxical impact of Finnish and American design and know-how in the era of “high Stalinism” in the late 1940s: as so often, pressing material need trumped ideological purity in the practical workings of the Soviet state.
- 6 A further asset of the book is that Traven has drawn on a number of family archives – some dating back to the early Soviet period – to reconstruct everyday life at the dacha. Written documentary evidence is supplemented by oral history interviews with residents of key dacha settlements and by a fascinating collection of more than thirty contemporary photographs from family collections.
- 7 Thus, Traven tells an interesting story and puts valuable new sources in the public domain. She could, however, do more to explain the principle on which she has selected her sources and her themes. No study of a broad social phenomenon like the dacha, however scrupulously it is conducted, can ever hope to be comprehensive; this makes it all the important to reflect on the story that one is telling as well as simply telling it. Does Traven believe that her fascinating case studies are representative of the Soviet dacha phenomenon, or of the principal types of dacha? As the book stands, it seems to overlook or downplay certain types of dacha experience – notably the rental sector in the pre-war era.
- 8 The book would also benefit from a slightly more ambitious intellectual framework. One such framework is chronological: how exactly to measure continuity and change across the major historical divides of 1917 and 1991? Unfortunately, Traven’s brief historical introduction on the pre-revolutionary dacha and her more elaborate chapter on the post-Soviet dacha are not quite up to the standard of the main part of the book. Other frameworks might be sociological or anthropological: how exactly does a history of the dacha help us to understand Soviet society, its structure, its mechanisms, its self-reproduction? Here again Traven offers no sustained reflections. She cites in her bibliography Naomi Galtz’s richly analytical PhD thesis (“Space and the Everyday: An Historical Sociology of the Moscow Dacha,” University of Michigan, 2000), but she does not refer to it in her text and does not seem to enter any kind of dialogue with it.
- 9 These slight failings should not, however, obscure the distinct virtues of *La datcha en Russie*. Traven’s book, although it perhaps misses a few analytical opportunities, is empirically rich and makes a real contribution to the social and cultural history of twentieth-century Russia.