
Reviewed by: Laura Schlosberg (Independent Scholar)

Katherine Pickering Antonova’s *An Ordinary Marriage: The World of a Gentry Family in Provincial Russia* is a revision of the author’s 2007 Columbia University PhD dissertation. Part of Oxford University Press’s growing catalog of works engaging gender, particularly masculinity, and domesticity, *An Ordinary Marriage* examines the Chikhachevs, a middling gentry family of Vladimir (now Ivanovo) Oblast. Based primarily on the family’s detailed and serendipitously preserved archival collection in the State Historical Archive of the Ivanovo Oblast, as well as Andrei Chikhachev’s published articles, the book is a microhistory of the Chikhachev family and their provincial life during the middle third of the nineteenth century.

Antonova explores the lives of Andrei and Natalia Chikhachev and their children Aleksei and Aleksandra as a lens onto their estates and the province. Drawing on the family's extensive documentation of their lives, and on Andrei’s observations and ideas, Antonova demonstrates how the family’s everyday life related to contemporary ideas about domesticity. She argues that what seems to be an unusual division of labor in the Chikhachev household reflected flexible household roles based on the couple’s strengths, property holdings, and backgrounds, as well as the economic and geographical realities of their estates in Vladimir. Natalia’s management of the household and the family estates drew on her acumen in these areas. Andrei, who had less aptitude for estate management, pursued an intellectually oriented life educating their children, writing extensively, and engaging in local service and philanthropic activities.

The strength of Antonova’s work is her close reading of the archival documents, and how she draws on them to animate and describe the Chikhachev’s world. The first six chapters depict the Chikhachevs’ worldview, society, provincial community, and household. At their foundation, the family’s estates were models of benevolent paternalism benefitting the extended family of the village. Moral education, paternalism, and an effective khoziaka were the keys to maintaining the order and health of the household. The family’s leisure, social activities and relations, as well as the family’s responses to illness and death are covered in chapters five and six. Chapters seven and eight focus on the couple’s gendered domestic roles and how these related to Andrei’s beliefs about the elements of an effective household economy. The last two chapters shift into an intellectual history of Andrei’s ideas. In addressing Andrei’s writings on education, Russia’s economic development and conservative thought, Antonova demonstrates how his published writings were an extension of the ideas developed in his unpublished works. Andrei synthesized various strains of thought – sometimes commingling different trends – to express a conservative viewpoint that was similar to, but distinct from Slavophilism, and that reflected his provincial gentry family’s everyday life.
Antonova concludes that the structure of the Chikhachevs’ estate and delineation of family responsibilities – indeed, their entire worldview – sat on the unstable foundation of Imperial Russia’s serf-based economy. The Chikhachevs’ pre-emancipation provincial estate was a relic of a particular set of historical circumstances that could not adapt to significant change. With the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, their advancing age, the different pathways of their children, and the changes across the Russian empire, the Chikhachevs’ world was unsustainable.

Near the end of each chapter, Antonova engages with scholars of Russian, Anglo-America, and occasionally French and German domesticity and gentry cultures. The intended audience for this book seems to shift between these specialists. The author’s framework for domesticity and gender would have benefitted from an engagement with Anglo-American scholarship published between 2000-2010 and some engagement with the Russian-language research on nineteenth-century provincial gentry and provincial estates. There were occasional contradictory descriptions across the book (for example, documentation of Andrei’s violence, temper, and remorse (65), followed by an assertion that he was not abusive as that would threaten the household’s culture (75)), as well as repetitive statements across chapters about topics like Andrei’s view of moral education. Some may find the book’s title misleading, for readers encounter a detailed portrait of a provincial family’s life and world, one that adds to the growing body of studies of middling Russian gentry life in the nineteenth century.