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# **WANDERING WORKERS**

Mores, Behavior, Way of Life, and Political  
Status of Domestic Russian Labor Migrants

*ibidem*-Verlag  
Stuttgart

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## Preface

This book addresses the issue of Russian wandering workers—*otkhodniks*. They are a specific group of internal temporary labor migrants who migrate from small towns and rural areas to major cities and industrial centers. Among them, seasonal and agricultural workers are a negligible minority. In our view, these Russian labor migrants differ from both circular (circulatory) cross-border migrants and seasonal agricultural migrants, well familiar in many countries of the world. To highlight these differences, we refer to them as *wandering workers* (in Russian—*temporary departers*), and avoid using the terms *circular migrants* and *seasonal workers* more familiar to western researchers. A self-designation for such *wandering workers* appeared in Russia about three or four centuries ago. People started calling them *otkhodniks* [from the Russian *otkhod*—temporary departure], and this is the term they themselves and the Russian scientists still use.

Initially, we planned this monograph as a simple (authentic) translation of our book *Otkhodniks*<sup>1</sup>, which appeared in Russian at the end of 2013. However, in the past year and a half, while the monograph was being translated, we continued our field-work supplementing the existing records by the findings of new expeditions, observations and interviews. At the same time, we refined the conclusions made earlier based on the newly obtained field data, tested new hypotheses, and conceptualized our records. As a result, the English edition differs significantly from the Russian version both by the volume of the presented material, and by its analysis. Actually, it turned out to be a new book about *otkhodniks*. We have been collecting field data for this book continuously over five years, in summer and in winter. We have revised every chapter, expanded all of them, and added new ones. To the extent possible, the presentation of the material has been adapted for readers unfamiliar with the Russian reality in the sphere of labor behavior. In particular, wherever necessary, we have provided an explanation of the terms and events, which was not required for the Russian readers. We have also provided a US dollar equivalent not only for all our estimates but also for the cost of various types of work and wages received by the *otkhodniks*. For this purpose, we applied the average official USD/RUB exchange rate effective at the time of the surveys, which was 30–32 rubles per 1 US dollar (although, obviously, the purchasing power of the ruble in the Russian province was at that time substantially higher). We are extensively quoting our respondents, and we have retained all the original colloquialisms, slang, and

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1 Plusnin J.M., Zausaeva Y.D., Zhidkevich N.N., and Pozanenko A.A., *Otkhodniks* / S.G. Kordonsky (ed.). – M.: Novyj Khronograf, 2013, 376 p.

phonetics. To the extent possible, the translator has tried to convey this manner of speaking in the English text.

The co-authors contributed to this book as follows. Juri Plusnin supervised the research and development of the structure and content of the monograph, and co-wrote all the sections of the book. With the technical and editorial assistance of Natalia Zhidkevich and Artemy Pozanenko, he also re-wrote the entire text of the 2013 monograph, significantly amended and supplemented every chapter, and added two new chapters. Yana Zausaeva participated in writing chapters 4, 9, and 10 herein. Natalia Zhidkevich wrote chapter 8 and participated in writing chapter 5. Artemy Pozanenko took part in writing chapters 4 and 10, and was the principal author of chapters 5, 6, and 7.

## Preface to the 2013 Russian edition

Otkhodnichestvo as a phenomenon is not just a matter of academic interest for us. The senior co-author is himself an otkhodnik and experiences first-hand all the advantages and hardships of a "migratory" lifestyle. The three junior co-authors are involved in the matter in another way. For the past three years, we have traveled extensively; we have visited dozens of small towns and villages and knocked on hundreds of doors. We are looking for, finding, and trying to engage in conversation a mostly unknown, however, extremely interesting and charismatic type of person who calls himself *otkhodnik*—an archaic and seemingly long-forgotten (even by sociologists) term—and who leads a busy and productive life filled with hard work and weary household chores.

We have spent many hours amid the otkhodniks talking to them and their families. As a result, we have adopted their viewpoints and to a certain extent even started identifying ourselves with them. Apart from an advantage, this also poses the threat of losing a researcher's impartial approach. Nevertheless, we did our utmost to maintain a clear perception and present our findings primarily as sociologists. It could be that in certain instances we deviated from this principle.

The book provides a sociological phenomenological (not statistical) overview of contemporary otkhodnichestvo and relies on the findings of our fieldwork. We chose to present only this aspect of the recurrent labor migration in Russia—a one-sided approach does not always hinder research.

Writing the book turned out to be a long and complicated process; it was not easy to outline and summarize the interviews we had taken. Probably, partly due to this we failed to achieve all our objectives and feel a certain dissatisfaction with some aspects of our work. However, we count on the benevolence of our readers who chose at least to leaf through this book about otkhodniks, which is based on their words, stories and experience.



## Acknowledgements

Three sponsors contributed to our empirical research of contemporary otkhodnichestvo. This enabled us to make many expeditions to different small towns across Russia.

The Khamovniki Foundation for Social Research was our principal sponsor. Initially, it allocated funds for our studies in 2010–2011; subsequently, in 2011–2012, it provided a special grant for the research of otkhodnichestvo (Project 2011-001, *Otkhodniks in small towns*). Two separate projects supported by the Foundation and implemented in 2012–2013 contributed to the research. These projects are: *The social portrait of the contemporary Russian otkhodnik*, led by Natalia Zhidkevich; *The social structure of local communities territorially isolated from public authorities*, led by Artemy Pozanenko. Thus, the diverse and lasting support of the Khamovniki Foundation enabled us to focus on the fieldwork. In addition, the Foundation sponsored the publication of the monograph *Otkhodniks* in Russian and financed its translation and issue in English. Such a supportive (friendly) attitude to our research of labor migration gave us the opportunity to realize our ideas fully. We are very grateful to Alexander Klyachin, Khamovniki Foundation Chairman of the Board, for his interest in the research of otkhodnichestvo and his understanding of the challenges involved. His position allowed us to perform extended field research in spite of the many difficulties facing such an ambitious project. We would like to express our gratitude to Cholpon Beishenalieva, Khamovniki Foundation Director, for her attention to our problems, her patience when it came to inevitable disruptions, and her ongoing support and encouragement. We are certain that the success of our research is largely a result of her efforts.

In 2011, when the project was already under way, supported by the Khamovniki Foundation, we received assistance from the public Russian Foundation for Humanities in the form of a grant for field research of otkhodnichestvo (Grant No. 11-03-18022e, *Otkhodniks in Russian small towns*). This allowed us to collect additional field data.

In 2012–2013, we received funding from the Academic Fund of the National Research University—Higher School of Economics for the research of a particular aspect of the matter—interaction of the otkhodniks with the municipal authorities (Grant No. 11-01-0063, *Will the economically active population become an ally of the municipal authorities? Analysis of disruptions in the relations between the local communities and the authorities*, led by J.M. Plusnin).

In 2014, on our own initiative, we continued collecting additional data on otkhodnichestvo wherever possible; we conducted observations in the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East.

We are grateful to Olga V. Smirnova, director of the Kologriv local history museum, for her attention to our requests and the assistance she provided when we were working in the archive of the Kologriv branch of the Kostroma state museum reserve.

Many assistants helped us in the fieldwork and in the primary analysis of collected data. It is with great pleasure that we thank all the participants of the work, many of whom were at that time students, post-graduate students, and staff of the National Research University—Higher School of Economics. Among them are: Irina Popova; Sergey Pyzhuk; Sergey Sergeev, MSc; Evgenia Shardakova, MSc; Vasily Skalon, MSc; Anna Baidakova, MSc; Galina Babkova, PhD in history; Ivan Kokovin, PhD in history; and Jaroslav Slobodskoj-Plusnin, PhD in biology.

Obviously, we would have been unable to prepare this text without the information that we obtained from the local experts and the otkhodniks themselves. We mention the names of the local experts (with their permission) in the texts of the interviews with them. We refer to our otkhodnik respondents by name and the initial of the surname, or even anonymously, because that was their precondition for giving the interview. We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the several hundred people, who agreed to talk to us and patiently listened to our boring questions, provided explanations, swore and joked out of despair, and laughed at themselves and at us: everything that is written in this book was expressed and suggested by them.

# Introduction

*"We have good people, patient and smart people.  
They suffer, suffer, and suffer!*

*They hear everything and see everything.  
However, they know that yelling and screaming will not  
change anything. No one will bring them bread; no one will  
give them money. The rich get everything. The poor have to  
survive. And they survive. They work wherever they can find  
a job. And they are happy when they get paid on time—  
thank God!"<sup>2</sup>*

*Otkhodnik, otkhodnik crafts and trades, otkhod*—these notions, which had already become archaic in Russia in the first third of the twentieth century, are back in use. After the end of the Soviet period of Russian history, when such a phenomenon could not exist in principle, *otkhodnichestvo* as a special form of labor migration re-emerged in Russia. Certainly, the new form differs from the one that existed a century ago, but it has such significant similarities with the previous one, that some researchers were compelled to return to the old, long-forgotten, term *otkhodnichestvo* [temporary departure from home to earn money elsewhere].

*Otkhodnichestvo* is an amazing phenomenon of our social and economic life. Primarily, it is amazing by its invisibility. Not only ordinary people in big cities know nothing about *otkhodnichestvo* and the *otkhodniks*, but also the authorities and until recently, the scientists were unaware of them. In the meantime, this is a mass phenomenon: according to our rough and conservative estimates, out of approximately 55 million Russian families, at least 10–15 million, or maybe even 20 million families live off *otkhodnichestvo* of one or even both adult members. In other words, the *otkhodniks* provide a considerable proportion of the economic potential of the country, but this remains unrecorded by statistics; moreover, it cannot be recorded, because the *otkhodniks* as market participants seem to be non-existent.<sup>3</sup>

For the authorities they do not exist as a target of social policy either. They are not recorded in local official accounts and not reflected in local economic indicators (but at least half of them are registered in the economy at the place of employ-

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2 Interview with a woman, who had moved with her husband from Ostrovnoy, taken during a round of a nine-storey apartment house; Podporozhye, Leningrad Region, February 2012.

3 Evidently, the *otkhodniks* and their activities are in one way or another recorded in our large-scale "shadow" economy (see: Radaev, 1999; Ryvkina, 1999) and in the structure of informal employment (see: Barsukova, 2003 and 2004; Sinyavskaya, 2005; *Non-standard employment*, 2006; Barsukova, Radaev, 2012; *In the shadow of regulation*, 2014). However, this category of labor migrants has not been differentiated yet.

ment). They do not work according to their professional background and, perhaps, they have received free public vocational education and training for nothing. They pay no taxes; therefore, they do not expect to receive any pension. They are never sick, so they do not benefit from public healthcare services. Moreover, they do not need any social support from the state, because they rely only on themselves. Although the *otkhodniks* may be the most active part of the Russian population, they actually remain outside politics—the public authorities do not notice them. Not only are they non-existent for the government bodies as an object of governance, the local authorities do not take them in consideration either, even if they are aware of them. Although the *otkhodniks* are those very residents, for whose sake the municipal authorities are implementing the worthiest of all theories of management—"the art of clearing the streets of manure".<sup>4</sup>

Sadly, so far the *otkhodniks* have also been non-existent for Russian sociology: we have no idea who they are, what life they lead, what they eat, what drives them, and what they dream of. We know nothing about their families or the way they bring up their children. We have no clue what distinguishes them from the families of their non-*otkhodnik* neighbors. We are continuing to study the exceptionally important phenomenon of Russian *otkhodnichestvo*, but we are doing it as historians rather than sociologists. However, rare sociological studies of the late Soviet (e.g., Islamov, Travin, 1989; Shabanova, 1992a and 1992b; Shabanova, 1993) and contemporary (e.g., Florinskaya, Roschina, 2004; Florinskaya, 2006; Roshchina, 2007, 2008; White, 2007, 2009; Employment and *otkhodnichestvo*, 2008; Kapustina, 2008, 2013; Velikiy, 2010; Baranenkova, 2012) *otkhodnichestvo* do exist. The most frequent and comprehensive coverage of *otkhodnichestvo* and its aspects can be found in studies devoted to internal temporary labor migration as a demographic process - in recent years, increasingly (e.g., Badyshtova, 2001, 2002; Florinskaya, 2001; Zayonchkovskaya, 2001; Moiseenko, 2004; Zayonchkovskaya, Mkrtychyan, 2007; Mkrtychyan, 2009; Mkrtychyan, Karachurina, 2014; Florinskaya et al., 2015). Researchers of the Russian village and peasantry have also mentioned this topic in passing (e.g., Fadeeva, 2002, 2012; Nikulin, 2004; Kalugina, Fadeeva, 2009; Kalugina, 2012; Nefedova, 2013). However, these studies are still incompatible with the magnitude of the phenomenon.

What is Russia's new *otkhodnichestvo*? Why did it suddenly re-emerge in contemporary Russia after decades, as if from a clean slate? The matter has long appeared important to us, but we were able to launch a systematic and detailed study of ot-

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4 Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin (1826–1889), Russian writer and vice-governor. The quoted phrase is from the famous novel, *The history of a town*.

khodnichestvo only a few years ago. We realized the magnitude of the phenomenon, but also understood that the problem could not be "tackled" using standard scientific techniques: select from the array of official statistical data; describe based on the findings of a mass survey, by completing questionnaires, recording sporadic field observations, or by drawing parallels with the historical otkhodnichestvo. The only way to get a close look at contemporary otkhodnichestvo and grasp its essence is to collect meticulously individual data obtained in the course of direct communication with the representatives of this category of labor migrants. That is exactly what we engaged in. We immersed ourselves for several years in fieldwork. We traveled across the country to small towns and rural areas seeking out such people on an individual basis in order to meet with them and ask about their lifestyle; the underlying circumstances; the goals they pursue; the threats and risks they encounter on the way; as well as about their families and children; relatives and bosses; neighbors and authorities. As we can judge, they were rather frank with us, because the views of numerous people living in several dozen locations dispersed over thousands of kilometers proved to be similar and like-minded. Based on conversations with these people and their families and on observations of their behavior, we were able to get an idea of their permanent and temporary living environment; household and economic activities; everyday life; as well as relations in society and the nature of interaction with the authorities. We tried to describe the diversity of their occupations and draw the portrait of a typical otkhodnik.

Using various indirect methods, we attempted to assess the scope of the phenomenon. We now believe that when launching the research of otkhodnichestvo, we clearly underestimated its magnitude. The phenomenon may be much broader and deeper than what we managed to describe in this book. We are only carefully assuming that the immediate and remote economic, social, cultural, and political implications of contemporary otkhodnichestvo will be crucial for the development of Russia. Probably, not only Russia, given the proliferation of such phenomena in the modern world.

In the meantime, we do not overestimate the significance of our work: it is quite fragmentary, as any scientific study can be. We see our shortcomings and anticipate that we have made quite a few erroneous judgments. Moreover, within the team of authors, there is no complete consensus as to the interpretation of facts and their generalizations. Over the years of work, we have developed close links with our brainchild; however, the text manifests a difference of opinions on certain issues. We believe this to be a natural outcome of the work on depicting the phenomenon of otkhodnichestvo—tremendous in scope and at that same time barely visible for

the contemporaries. This book contains no statistical data (demographic, migration, financial, etc.) usual for the analysis of historical *otkhodnichestvo*, or for economic analysis. Our task was to highlight the phenomenon and to capture its substantial features.

The structure of the monograph follows the pattern of a phenomenological description, where we define the phenomenon of *otkhodnichestvo* distinguishing it from other forms of labor migration, and consider it in a historic context. We also compare the Russian phenomenon with similar processes in the global labor market (chapters 1 and 2). Chapter 3 deals with the methods applied to identify and study *otkhodniks* and *otkhodnichestvo*. Here we provide a description of the records, which served as a basis for further generalizations. Chapter 4 proposes different approaches to estimating the population of *otkhodniks* in Russia. Chapter 5 reviews the employment destinations targeted by the *otkhodniks* and their principal occupations, as well as the regional specialization by type of craft. Chapters 6 and 7 address the *otkhodniks'* labor motivation and economic behavior; the working conditions and living arrangements at the workplace; their earnings and spending patterns. Chapter 8 describes the *otkhodnik* as a social type and demonstrates his behavior at home, as well as relations within the family and with neighbors. Chapter 9 deals with the rather obscure relations between the *otkhodniks* and the public authorities—the state and local self-government bodies. The final tenth chapter is an attempt to assess the socio-cultural and political significance of *otkhodnichestvo* for Russian society. We are trying to determine the consequences that mass *otkhodnichestvo* of the most active part of the population can have for Russia.