Anatolii Breslavskii


It is generally known that in Russia there has been a mass migration of rural dwellers to cities in post-Soviet times, but there has been relatively little study of this process in detail, and especially lacking are works on Siberia. Anatolii Breslavskii’s book ‘Unplanned Suburbs’ is the first major analysis of the extraordinary growth of the city of Ulan-Ude over the past 20 years or so. It is also more than a single-city study. This excellent book compares the post-Soviet patterns with those found elsewhere in the world, for example the mushrooming of shanty towns around major cities in Africa and Southeast Asia, the growth of suburbs in Europe and USA and closer cases such as the expansion of the tented areas (‘ger districts’) around Ulaanbaatar in Mongolia. The aim of the book is to categorise the main processes happening in the Siberian case, to describe the problems and advantages experienced by new residents and to give a prognosis of future eventualities.

One of the surprising features of Ulan-Ude for a European reader may be the extended and dispersed geography of the city. Founded initially as a fortress, and later a trading town at the confluence of the Selenga and Uda rivers, in Soviet times Ulan-Ude became both the capital of the Buryat Autonomous Socialist Republic and an industrial centre. This meant that it became the only true city in a large region, and at the same time that it extended to include widely separated railway engineering, glass manufacture, aircraft, textile and milling plants, as well as military bases. Each of these industries built separate
housing complexes for their own workers, which became urban sub-districts. Most of the land between these industrial areas was then built up to accommodate the doubling of the population between 1970 and 2010. But the ‘suburbs’ (prigorody) described by Breslavskii are yet further away. Ranging from 10 km to over 30 km from the city centre, these are the ‘urban settlements’ that have attracted tens of thousands of rural dwellers. Over 25 such dispersed settlements are counted as suburbs of Ulan-Ude.

Breslavskii’s book is organised as a sociological study of a new urban agglomeration within its regional setting. It is analytically thorough, restrained in its views, and it is clearly written in eloquent, non-turgid language. He explains why so many people have moved to the city environs—in the vast majority of cases this has been to obtain employment, given the collapse of rural agriculture and small manufacturing. Unlike in Europe, where suburban residents tend to be middle-class folk who have chosen to leave the centre to gain more space and amenities, in the Siberian case moves out of town form a much smaller proportion and are done mostly by people who cannot succeed in the city (drop-outs, people whose income has fallen). The great majority of migrants to the suburbs are working country-folk of restricted means. They have settled in these scattered sites often simply because they are cheaper—in fact, the only places possible. The sites chosen for settlement are in districts outside the administrative boundary of the city and therefore are not subject to high urban taxes and dues. In these areas ‘empty land’ could be taken, fenced in and built up piecemeal into nakhalovki (‘brazen places’) as they are locally dubbed, without any of the legal documentation necessary in the city. The local authorities of the districts encouraged the land grab, since they could claim some (small) taxes from the new residents. At the same time, these settlements are just about close enough to the city for it to be possible to commute to work. Breslavskii’s careful work, which is based partly on local statistics and partly on his own survey of three suburbs, shows how the migrants balance the main advantage (it seems that work has not been difficult to find in the city) against the numerous problems they experience.

By and large, it seems that the incomers are happy to have made the choice to live near the city. Besides receiving an income from employment, they gain access to the city’s schools, medical services, shops, leisure facilities, etc. At the same time, uncomfortable as it may be, their material existence in the suburb is not all that different from the rural village they left behind. Many of the suburbs are in fact outgrowths of former state farms (now hardly functioning) and the houses newly erected are on the ‘countryside’ model, i.e. small one-storey wooden cottages, without running water and heated by wood or coal stoves. Some migrants simply dis-assembled their village houses and moved them, log by log, to the new site. The residents report many problems: electricity and