Seeing the labor of the farm worker, it is impossible to appreciate sufficiently how human strength can withstand such prolonged and unceasing efforts, and it is especially made completely improbable when one sees on what the laborer is fed and strengthens his abilities.

All summer long the ovens smoke very rarely, for bread [is baked] only once in two weeks, and workers eat cold foods, which consist of bread or oat flour, and for the most difficult labors, like harvesting or hay-mowing, in order to save bread, of which they eat a lot, they make a mash from various rye, oat and buckwheat flours, not having sifted them, mixed in kvass, and they eat it raw, which serves as proof to what degree nature exhausts itself, when it is possible to be satisfied with such food.

Such, according to an anonymous correspondent of the Imperial Russian Department of Agriculture, was one troubling sign of the “plight” of the Russian peasant in the 1840s. The scanty meals of the Russian peasant seemed a sign not only of possible problems with mortality, but also with morality, for rude and crude peasant foods could be interpreted in different ways. Many saw them as a sign of peasant backwardness, of their “simplicity” in a rather problematic sense. Visitors to Russia looking for evidence of Russia’s backwardness, for example, often found it in Russia’s peasants and their everyday life. According to one such traveler, “...the manners of the Russian peasantry are those of a people still in their infancy. Everything which surrounds him reveals a state of nature that is still almost savage.” 2 But the 1840s were also the decade of the Slavophiles and their wholehearted admiration for the Russian peasant – rudeness, crudeness and all. These observers saw peasants who were strong, healthy, and hard-working both physically and morally. And for some, like the doctor Ivan Zatsepin, peasant food, exactly because of its relatively limited nature, was the source of that great strength.3

1. Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (henceforth RGIA) f. 398, op. 8, d. 2537, “O vozmozhnosti ushchishrit’ sostojanie zemledel’ia i zemledel’cva v Rossii” (1844) II. 9ab-10.
2. Germain de Lagny, The Knout and the Russians; or the Muscovite Empire, the Czar, and his People, trans. John Bridgeman (London: David Bogue, 1854), 156.
3. Ivan Iakovlevich Zatsepin, O postnoi i skoromnoi pishche v meditsinskom otnoshenii, (Moscow: Lazarevych Institut Vostochnykh lazykov, 1841), 30-31 and passim. When I first went to Richard Hellie with the idea of writing a dissertation on food in the nineteenth century, he immediately